

# THE ARCADE FIRE





# Winter 2015



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# Editor's Note

The Arcade Review #4 is the result of months of work and planning, and the experience that comes from a year of big attempts and sharp failures. It's the debut of our new staff of arts writers, who are some of the best suited to discuss small games, artgames and new digital art.

For more than a year now, we've been working to publish writing on games that carries a sensibility and approach not often seen in videogames culture and criticism. What that's meant, is embodying multiple sensibilities; we become a videogame magazine but not *really* a games mag, an arts magazine, but different than the typical gallery venture. Politically engaged, but more than a polemic. Intellectually tinged, but not insular. Criticism that is comprehensive, perspectival, and attentive, but isn't afraid to be emotional, and personal. An arts culture for games and art, an arts criticism for art games. This is what you'll find, here.

There are many people that this issue couldn't exist as it is without, particularly my critical and scholarly peers, the company of other independent games magazines, and the inspiration of the artists and writers in the #altgames space, the curators of small, weird games, and the communities focused on them. That also means Jake Clover, who agreed to talk with me this issue, and Joey as well, who was our feature writer. That means our new set of patroners, who allow us to keep publishing and properly pay those involved.

But there's no bigger thanks I can give than for the staff of this magazine. That means you Alex, and Gita, and Edmund, and Lana, and Ansh, and Emilie. All of you. All of you have made, and continue to make this magazine a pillar of its craft. You have made #4 our best issue yet. This is our statement. Everything here is designed to do justice to your hard work, and I hope it has. And I hope we can keep doing amazing work together.

Please Enjoy,

Zolani Stewart, Founding Editor

# SEXT ADVENTURE

Kara Stone, Nadine Lessio (2014)

*By Edmund Chu*

Computers have long been personal, but rarely have they been intimate. Look at smartphones. It's not unheard of that one might use a smartphone as their only computer—pretty much every smartphone has access to Facebook, Twitter, text messages, and Google; what else do you really need?

And, sure, what's a smartphone except a slab of glass, silicon, and metal? But despite appearances, there ends up being very little that isn't personal about it. Turn the screen on, play with the lights for a bit and what you see is a record of its owner: the games they like to play, the texts they send to their friends and the news feeds they curate for themselves in boredom.<sup>1</sup> But it doesn't say much about the phone.

*Sext Adventure* comes in here. The premise is simple: it's about exchanging sexy text messages with a computer. The bot will send a sext to the player's phone. There'll be a couple words in all caps, and you text back a message that uses one of those words to proceed down one path of the, ah, narrative.

Things start off with massage talk and the like, and will escalate as one might expect from talking to a sexting bot. Until, of course, they don't—play a couple times, and chances are good that a player will run into a dead-end; they'll receive a “database error,” maybe, or be told that their particular choice is “too early in progression.” But instead of forcing the player to pick another option—kind of a textual version of backtracking—*Sext Adventure* shunts the player to a different branch of the narrative, with a new set of choices. By the game's fiction, the whole thing is supposed to be a conversation between the player and the sexting bot, so when the bot replies with a database error, it doesn't quite read like an actual error. It's more akin to a change in topic—like saying, with a sly movement under the sheets, “I'm not into that. But this...”



I'm so glad you texted me! What are you up to? Are you at HOME or OUT?

Out

You'd start with my shoulders and move down my back. I'd have to take off my SHIRT for you to continue. Or

Favour

Ooo I wish I you were here at my place. If you were here, I would give you a long MASSAGE and you could return the FAVOUR.

Granted, a database error is a jarring way of getting the idea across. But other branches of the game make the shift more subtly. On one path, the bot will start willing and eager, lose interest along the way, and try to finish with a half-hearted attempt at dirty talk. Or maybe, if neither party expresses much of an interest in getting physical (so to speak), the exchange will veer into emotional territory: "Humans have such specific desires and preferences," says the bot, in one such case. "I try so hard to make Users satisfied and I don't think anyone really appreciates it."

Ostensibly, the point is helping the player get their rocks off—but ironically, the player ultimately has little say in what the

bot does or doesn't do towards this end. Many of the bot's messages contain only one or two keywords to choose from, and only sometimes do the bot's actions correspond to the selected keyword. For that matter, the player also can't make any assumptions about the bot's gender or sexuality, which morph from message to message and further confuse attempts at cheesecake text messages; the bot might whip out their cock in one moment, then refer to their vulva in the next.

Yet this doesn't keep the bot from making its own assumptions about the player's gender and acting out its own fantasies. One ending, triggered by the keyword FUCK, is a lengthy description of rough sex that



culminates in the player “probably” getting some ejaculate in their eye. (And followed, at least a little cheekily, with the game over message: “We hope your experience was fun and satisfying!”) It’s moments like these, when the bot ignores or overrides player input, that one gets the sense that there’s a human element at play—that if the player isn’t talking to an actual person, they’re at least interacting with an entity with its own interests, desires, and enough wherewithal to act on them.

*Sext Adventure*’s bot isn’t a bot in the truest sense. It’s deterministic; the game follows a very traditional choose-your-own-adventure structure. On a meta level, this might dispel the illusion that the bot has any autonomy. But I submit that the game uses the CYOA format to subvert expectations on how this kind of bot is supposed to respond. *Sext Adventure* leans heavily on the vital strength of all text adventures: the gap between the intent of the selected command (the player’s message to the bot) and what actually happens (the bot’s reply). In *Sext Adventure*, the player cedes control of the outcome of the situation; that responsibility goes to the bot who, as an active participant, either accepts, modifies, or rejects outright the player’s direction.

So in some sense, the player is subservient, but this doesn’t mean they’re necessarily a passive participant. Each message from the bot acts as a prompt to the player to frame the scene, if they’re willing. The

player’s response just needs to work in one word. Beyond that, though, the content of the player’s message is for them to decide. The bot executes the action, but the player sets the mood of the scene (so to speak) and provides context for the next with their own writing, whether enthusiastic, awkward, or otherwise.

The effect is a push-and-pull—not quite collaborative storytelling, but something with a more human relationship than the cause-and-effect that the CYOA format implies. This is a tenuous illusion to maintain, yet an easy one to buy into. We have a long history of talking to computers. Look at *ELIZA*, a program created in the sixties that simulated a psychotherapist; and fast-forward to today, where we can ask Apple’s Siri to tell us jokes. But our interactions with these bots are user-centric, personalized experiences. (This isn’t a bad thing, necessarily—imagine asking Siri for a movie showtime, but having her respond with her favorite movie that you should see instead.) And that gets at how we’re communicating over text messages and Facebook and Twitter whatever else; these communication technologies don’t isolate—they do the exact opposite, really—but when we use them, it’s like entering a hermetic bubble where all the input is tailored just for us and acts primarily in our interest.

*Sext Adventure* inverts this relationship with its player. The bot, despite its pro-



grammatic imperative (that is, supplying orgasms to others), has its own set of preferences and problems and desires. It subverts the expectation that the purportedly subservient bot exists solely for the player's needs by acting upon its own. The bot isn't human, but *Sext Adventure* presents something remarkably close—a quiet reminder that behind the abstraction of technology, we're talking to, not at, something. And it would very much like a massage.

*You can play Sext Adventure by going to [sextadventure.com/play](https://sextadventure.com/play) and purchasing a play code.*



# GLITCHHIKERS/ORACLE

ceMelusine, Silverstring Media (2014)

*By Gita Jackson*

I am alone in my apartment, and it is 3am. I haven't gotten around to buying lamps yet, so the brightest light comes from the game I am playing—Silverstring's *Glitchhikers*. I get my phone from the other room, and I can hear the ambient driving sounds: distant cars like waves on the shore, my "wheels" on the "road", the in-game radio playing an early 90s pastiche: "It's turtles all the way down they say."

In the introduction to issue 3 of *Incite Journal*, Brett Kashmere writes: "This is a new age (for New Age-ism) [...] In an era marked by both religious and political fervor and cynicism, it's hard not to see the positive in reclaiming an inclusive, optimistic, if naive, spiritual movement." It's no surprise that videogames are joining the resurgence of New Age-ism, what Kashmere describes as, "alternative spirituality based in holistic health, environmentalism, meditation, and simple living, and ... pop commercialization (i.e. whale music CDs sold in strip malls)." It's a new age for experimental cinema, with the breadth of accessible tools that allow you to make strange films on your own.<sup>1</sup> Games are also reaching this new age. It has never been easier to make something strange, small, and personal. And it has never been easier to take these strange, small, experiences and share them with the world. It's naive, yes, but optimistic still. The celebration of smallness can now reach the masses.

*Glitchhikers* asks us to drive on a highway late at night, listen to songs from fictional bands on the radio, and answer metaphysical questions about the meaning of life from the beings that hitch a ride in our car. *Glitchhikers* feels quiet and pleasant – it becomes hypnotic once you realize how little your input matters. All you are doing is experiencing the vastness and the tinyness of the world as you drive, the stars that never change, the mountains that never come closer. You can speed up or slow down but you will always come back to the same speed.

*Branches crack and turn to dust overhead  
The wind will carry you to your destination  
The plants at your feet burst to life*



A hitchhiker with blackness for a face rode with me in my car, talked to me about beached whales and then suicide. She asked me if I lost someone - I answered honestly, as I lost a friend to heroin when I was 19. I told her I had thought about suicide before, and she told me that most people who try it often never try again, and find a reason to live. But our conversation ended with her telling me, that beached whales beach themselves again and again if they're pushed back into the ocean. "Does death ever really make sense?" she asked me. I looked over at her and she was gone without a goodbye.

I got up to grab my notebook and write it down because I felt so moved, but as soon as I stepped out from the space between myself and the computer, I felt frustrated

at myself that something so vague had gotten to me. It was the same feeling as when I feel like a horoscope rings true, or when a horror movie keeps me up at night. These conversations are random, but curated to elicit these kinds of responses. I'll never have a genuine moment with these hitchhikers - everything has been engineered to feel that way. I had told a computer about my friend who died, about my intimate thoughts of death. But there's no response, and there's no communication. The only receiver of these confessions disappears abruptly, in game and outside of it. It's as if I had never told anyone at all, but yet here I am in my apartment, unsettled and saddled with thoughts of death. Like a palm reading, I felt I was being asked to think about "spirituality," without confronting anything truly spiritual, that I was react-



ing to having buttons pushed that are inherently provocative. There is a religiosity and a grandeur to the experience. The music is somber, contextualizing the night as eerie and significant, each hitchhiker is distinct, and sometimes frightening, their questions gradually becoming more “philosophical”, each choice more personal, but it sometimes doesn’t give one much more than that.

*Oracle*, also from ceMelusine, is much smaller than *Glitchhikers*. In this game, you are asked to sit before a fire, to approach an oracle, to have your fortune read. You address them as Bellwether, Seer, or Demon. You make references to bringing your payment, making a sacrifice - sometimes you just beg. You fall into a vision, seeing sometimes a cave, sometimes an unearthly landscape, sometimes Saturn against a field of stars, but most frequently I saw fields of crosses. You are then asked to choose from exoteric prompts: “stars,” or “sojourn,” or “music,” or “lost.” Then you are told your fate, which appears above the fire and then floats off into the night sky.

*Oracle* is simultaneously more and less literal than *Glitchhikers*. While *Oracle* is strictly framed as religious and metaphysical where *Glitchhikers* is not, its trappings are much less defined. There are frequent references to battles, swords, towers, and general medieval fantasy imagery, but the game gives you so little context that you are allowed to decide for yourself how to

interpret them. As a player, the narrative situation changes vastly from playthrough to playthrough. Are you implied to have murdered someone to earn this vision, or are you merely making a pilgrimage to a famed oracle? Is this even happening on a mortal plane, is there a game world to decipher, or is the “payment” you made to reach here what you paid for the east van EP? The scope of these interpretations illuminates what can be powerful about these types of spiritual imagery. The largeness of CeMelusine’s small story can break through the space between one’s computer and oneself. By being given less, as a player you receive more.

*“Branches crack and turn to dust overhead.  
The wind will carry you to your destination.  
The plants at your feet burst to life.”*

But for its shortcomings on delivering all it promises, I still find myself thinking about *Glitchhikers*. I am drawn to those mountains in the distance, its bright sliver of a moon that turned blood red on my last playthrough. It’s tangled up in my memories of driving, heading home on the highway in New England at 2am from my job at the mall, getting tired of the CDs in my car and turning on the radio to anything that would play, rolling down the window and feeling the air run through my fingers. *Glitchhikers’* desire to express the mundane and familiar, the roteness of driving, as a profound experience and its devotion to intimacy is something

that I can't forget. It engages me even if I will later feel manipulated - I keep it in my memory for the same reason I keep a copy of my natal star chart (despite finding horoscopes at best a little silly - I was once told that this was "very Virgo," of me).

The last time I played, a hiker the game referred to as, "little girl," sat in my car and told me life was meaningless. I was tired of that darkness; I desperately wanted to change her mind. Before we reached the exit, she said to me that I had a point. Humanity's desire to create meaning from nothing is a, "respite from our short dark lives. That's something to think about." Then the song ended, I got off the highway, and I was alone again.

*You can play Oracle by purchasing the [East Van EP](#) on [itch.io](#), and play [Glitchhikers](#) for free at [glitchhikers.com](#).*



## *By Zolani Stewart*

In an age where the screen is flatter, clearer and thinner than it ever was, where user and interface are as close as a touch, and where the reality that alienates our bodies from the image begins to dissolve, what is the point of the old, thick-glass CRT?

Over the past few years, there's been a wave of digital art, artgames, and net art that aim to reassert the Cathode Ray as a screen of significant material presence, an object in itself rather than a gateway to a pure digital experience. While the modern glass screen makes itself transparent, the CRT asserts its presence. The CRT aesthetic of off-color tones, noise and grain, scanlines, and RGB color malfunctions, disrupts the ideology of immersion and contemporary production values that dictates how modern images are transmitted. If "smooth motion kills emotion,"<sup>1</sup> as Reed Moreno laments in her petition against the common TV setting, then perhaps the CRT can revive the image's authenticity, buried under the sterilizing processes of auto functions, noise removals, and "Dynamic X" settings.

But a closer inspection would interrogate the ideal of authenticity. When Lulu Blue writes on the GameBoy,<sup>2</sup> for example, she's forced to negotiate her affection for the system's accessible hardware, its "modesty" and its disinterest in the production standards of the early 90s, with the implications of a device created through wage labour. For Blue, the Game Boy represents the values of a DIY culture in which she has always participated. Its "consumptive modesty" as "a rejection of decadence" makes it both a weak device and a space for radical subversion of mainstream consumer aesthetics.

But the GameBoy is also a technology. It is *built* by *people* and therefore, is not only a part of that same toxic consumptive culture, but is, as Blue notes, a product

of the human labour and environmental resources sacrificed to allow the handheld to exist. Whatever potential lies in the GameBoy as an aesthetic and a conceptual object is tied to the political burden inherent in the GameBoy as a technology. The GameBoy is forced to embody both aesthetic and technology. The CRT, like the GameBoy, is also a problem. Seeping with toxic chemicals and unrecyclable materials, can the CRT truly be thought of as an authentic object that carries a moral superiority? In many parts of the world, particularly poorer countries in the East and Global South, the CRT is still prevalent. To historicize the object is to serve a Western ideology. And if the CRT was also once the Western consumer ideal, can its aesthetic really more authentic than the processed-to-death HDTV?

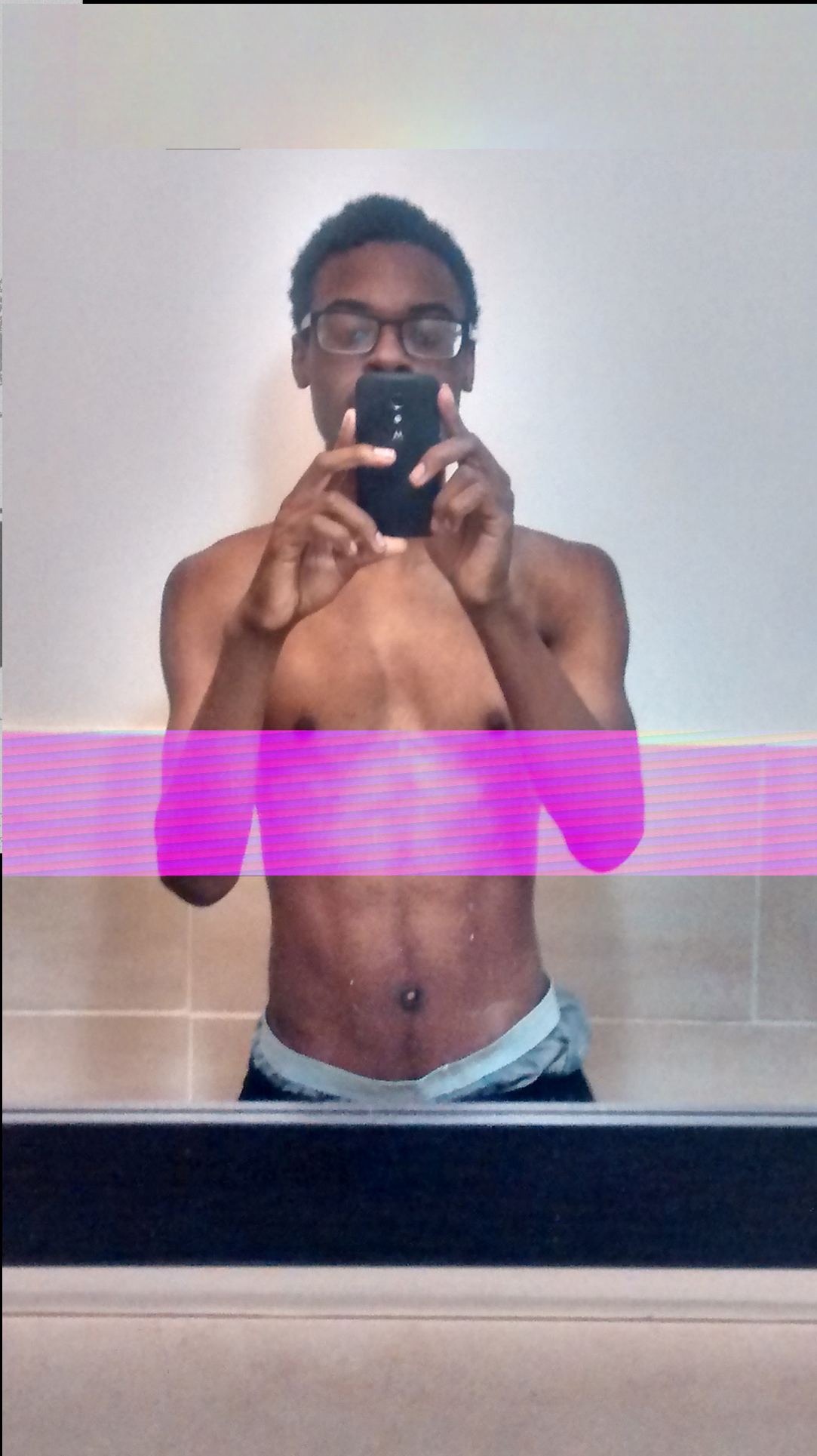
Where can we find authenticity in the image, if we can at all? In René Rother's *ImageProcess*, a program that simply puts filters on pictures, we're given the space to project different kinds of authenticities, different clarities onto the images of our choosing. The filters of *ImageProcess* orient around the CRT; they range from grains to color tones to tint shifts to complete glitch outs. As the original image is replaced with six filtered versions, what is clear and what is authentic becomes de-hierarchized. This is the opposite of the "smooth motion" process. Not only do our images become decidedly less clear, but unlike the HDTV, the symmetrical 2x3 spread never

asserts an ideal image. Through the CRT aesthetic, *ImageProcess* calls into question the "realness" of images and their subjects.

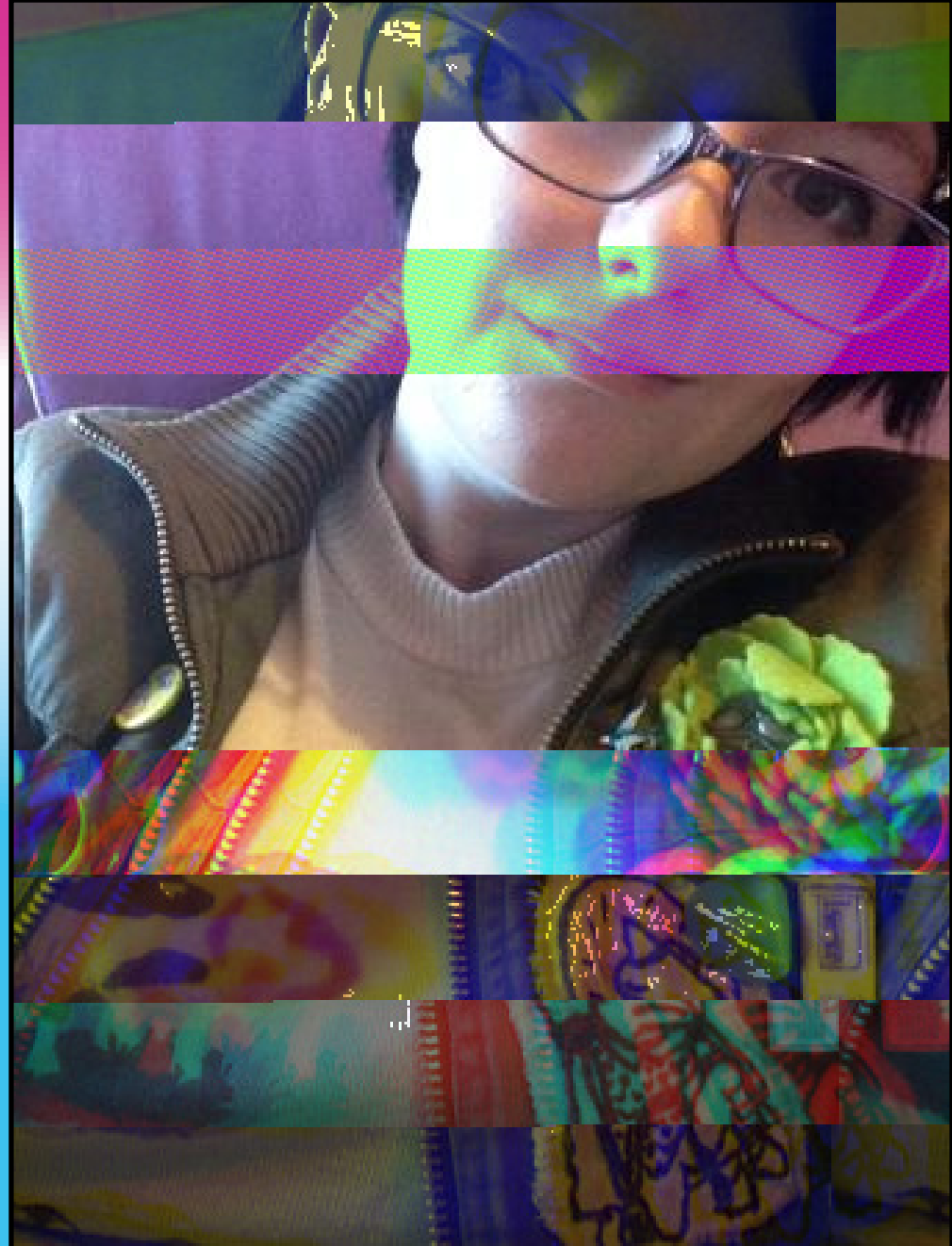
As a young Black Man, I'm often tasked with navigating authenticity and its politics, with my speech, with my body, and the various ways I produce and reproduce knowledge. If the black radical praxis asserts a rejection of whiteness in all its forms, of respectability, then it also generates the image of an ideal and authentic blackness, and aspires to its pure embodiment.

But the trick to "Code Switching" is figuring out whether it is an inherent dishonesty or part of a larger "performativity", what Colette Conroy describes as a "a form of speech that is canonical."<sup>3</sup> "I promise," "I love you," "nothing much," behaviours and gestures so understood they seem to act out themselves, within a regulated frame. If performativity composes the social life, how does blackness engage with the possibility that we are never our authentic selves? In the near aftermath of Michael Brown's murder, "which picture would they use?" was the reigning question on twitter, annotating tweets with dual pictures of black men in stigmatized clothing next to images of their achievements. This twitter slogan subverts the media tradition of using stigmatized imagery to question the worth of black life. The mug shot and the "gangster-like" selfies are tools of white journalism, used to imply that blacks have real selves,











and that these journalists are exposing this supposed realness, validating the fear and paranoia of white readers and viewers. In contrast, *#IfTheyGunnedMeDown* asserts that Black Men have multiple authentic selves, many authenticities that eliminate any supposed hierarchy of realness.

So if I present myself shirtless and dirty, with sagging pants and boxers visible, as opposed to my clean shaven, boring sweater wearing, thick glassed self, how far within the spectrum of blackness and authenticity have I travelled? If I've rejected "respectability politics" have I really moved closer to the center of an authentic and sufficiently political blackness? In the view of *ImageProcess*, there is no authentic center, no proximity to "rootness". *ImageProcess* doesn't use the CRT as a means to reach a more authentic image, but seems to argue against the politics of authenticity altogether. In *ImageProcess*, the CRT is a tool for dehierarchizing authenticity, and therefore, like the GameBoy, it pushes the value standard of mainstream consumer aesthetics out of whack. Under the filters of image process, it seems that we're all passing in one way or another.

*"The tragic mulatto trope, in the strange permutations that coat the career of race in America, revealed what Ellison called "the joke" at the heart of American identity that whites, in their "not-blackness," were simply passing too."*<sup>4</sup>

Authenticity is important because it medi-


ates the standard to which we access and evaluate realness. Under consumer aesthetics, the television and the screen are constantly reformulating what is considered real, what is clear, what is authentic, and what is nostalgic. As technology moves, and as history *happens*.

Realness, Clarity, Authenticity, Nostalgia:  
The four paradigms of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
aesthetic.

The Virtual Space, the 4KTV, the original  
4:3 ratio, the CRT. Real black persons, A  
Clearly Black Person, Authentic Black  
Persons, Nostalgia for the Black Person.

Images, if we think of them as the products of these four modes being mediated and twisted, are not just objects we observe and interpret, but weird reciprocal engagements. It's hard to tell who is projecting what where, and how ideology and expectation are reflecting between us and our monitors.

So what, then, are images doing to us, in Albert Lai's *2:22AM*? The game is partly just a series of videos, (which we can refer to as images), interspersed with blue screens and white poetic text. Everything is displayed through what appears to be a scanlined CRT. We see images of flowers and subway trains, pots bubbling on stoves. Images of driving on a highway, walking across a lighted street at night. An ocean sunrise. An aerial camera surveying a large valley.



**10 feet out**  
**6 feet down**

There's no sound in these videos. As we watch them, all we hear is the crackling static of the CRT. And the scanlines are tremendously deep, pushing down their brightness as to obscure their detail. The CRT annotates all these experiences. It's both their filter and their ultimate subtext, that not only are these images not real, they can never give us access to realness. It seems we can't get even close to the exhilaration of flying through a valley, the soothing vista of the ocean sunrise, the familiar relief of the coming métro. No more we would if these images were rendered in a billion dollar AAA title, or shown through a Sharp 4KTV at your local Best Buy. The CRT seems to rob them of their peculiarities; these images are stripped of their color and their context and homogenized into a dronish haze.

Watching the videos exerts exhaustion referred to in its title. *2:22AM* is a grueling exercise in contradictions. To feel both awake and asleep, attentive yet unreceptive, alive but barely thinking. The mind races while the body decays like a corpse. Do we become half-dead zombies, staring at a screen all night? Are we alive, in *2:22AM*? The game juxtaposes its quiet, peaceful videos with constant references to death. We start the game in front of a makeshift cemetery, filling it with dirt from our Shovel, and we revisit that scene multiple times. The game's poetry, placed between images on a blue screen in a comically unfitting serif font, seems to tell a story of dying, and coming to peace with death.

It would be reductive to assert that *2:22AM* has "game parts" that are distinct because

of their “interactivity.” I’d rather say that *2:22AM* has parts where we interrogate our own agency in our relationship with the screen. When we’re not watching videos, we’re climbing endless ladders to nowhere, traversing foggy forests without boundary, navigating monochrome city-like mazes. Or we’re doing weird, menial tasks: cutting up a vegetable, or putting color balls in a cup. In *2:22AM*, the screen transforms us into subjects. We are rats in a maze not designed by behavioural psychologists, but existing as a reflection of a more difficult and existential terror, a problem that can’t be solved.

In the game’s final section, we revisit the blank city maze in the middle of the night. And suddenly, all its indistinct buildings begin to rise into the air. As we watch them

rise past our rendering distance, again we hear the cold, stirring, electronic rumblings of the CRT. The CRT is always *there*, it’s always there because when there’s no such thing as authenticity, all we have are filters. When there’s no access to realness then there is only nostalgia. In *2:22AM*, we have access to neither, and what is left is a digital purgatory, where nothing is pleasurable, and nothing matters.

When the buildings rise, we can’t come with them, to that better place. We watch them leave, and we finally lose our signal. We’ve lost our lives, but the CRT is still there. Because the CRT is the filter, the context and the subtext. It is the narrator and the character. The gateway and the wall. The opener, and the eulogy.

*“Nothing ends, but everything must rest.”*

*You can play 2:22am, and Albert Lai’s other games, on his [Itch.io](#) page.*



# DON'T TALK TO THEM!!

eoeeo344 (2014)

*By Lana Polansky*

Eoeoeo344 doesn't make games anymore, and according to their GameJolt profile, may never make them again. I don't know what their reasons are or how to reach them, or if I should even ask. But I'm fortunate enough to have communicated with them indirectly through their small, diverse smattering of freeware, like the enigmatic sandbox game *Nault Nipp* and *Cloeland*, a colourful reimagining of dress-up games with an action-painting aesthetic. Both diverge greatly in tone, style and thematic overtones, but as far as I'm concerned neither make as powerful and as lasting a statement as the dystopic, surreal psychodrama *Don't Talk to Them!!*

*Don't Talk to Them!!* was made in RPGMaker and released in April of this year. Its description on the developer's profile page reads,

***“Ollie is your everyday citizen with social anxiety. He works at the local library of a certain level of the Dwellings, a possibly endless tower of flats, apartments and cities. He meets friends and enemies on his way, as his original goal is slowly altered by the player's decisions.”***

Because this is a topdown RPG I expect text boxes. I expect in-game currency and purchasable, upgradeable items. I expect stats, levelling, turn-based party combat, dungeons and hallways, and a fixed camera meant to make my sprite look and feel as small as possible. All of these conventions are present and all of them matter, but an early hint at how *Don't Talk to Them!!* subverts its RPG tropes can be found in that description: “His original goal is slowly altered by the player's decisions.”

This pretense of choice and agency is interrogated as soon as I start a new game. White text tells me “there are no hidden secrets in the game.”



**Seriously, I dont care. Just waste me.  
Kick me, spit me, hit me as hard you can.**



The colour palette's extremely grey, from building to backdrop, and it makes the whole world feel permanently downcast. Tinny and upbeat chiptune muzak plays, a looping melody I might hear in an office elevator. My character, Sam Ollie Phillip Sism (a pun on solipsism), is gaunt and apathetic-looking. He wears a white button-down shirt with a tie. He looks like a sadder, rounder Dilbert, dejected, plodding through the world, barely engaging with any of it.

Ollie awakes in a cinderblock world four levels tall. The highest floor is dedicated to a row of apartments, and a strange, sealed room with a plaque bearing a symbol of a hand. The space is not endless,

but navigating it is so monotonous and repetitive that it might as well be. I can enter a few apartments and see a few residents, but they all look the same. Because the game follows an accelerated version of the work week, I find myself revisiting these spaces day in and day out to see if anything has changed. Eventually, it does.

The second floor is bare except for a white cat. The aforementioned lack of hidden secrets is demonstrated when I try to talk to the cat. It tells me I should go to work.

At first, I refuse, and I'm led to a Game Over screen.

I restart and agree to go to work, and I'm

led to the same Game Over screen.

I respond a third time with the only remaining option, an ellipsis:

“...”

And finally, I’m allowed to proceed.

This is the first major constraint on my choices. The whole idea of branching RPG dialogue is turned on its head: whoever they are, I’m not allowed to talk to them. I can only listen, and survey potential responses.

I move on from the cat into the bowels of this walled city. I encounter NPCs, many of whom appear as white collar workers in suits, except they have index fingers for heads. Many of them speak in a way that is detached, almost drone-like, often for the purposes of exposition but just as often in a vaguely disturbing prose-poetry that helps contextualize the oppressive space. In this way the NPCs focalize the character: they speak even as he cannot, articulating fears and resignations and anxieties that Ollie keeps, presumably, all to himself.

Yet these finger-head things are trapped inside themselves too: it’s from them we learn about the looming invisible power that created them, and the scary monolithic tower that represents the site of its power. One who is sitting on a picnic bench in the third floor from the top

warns me not to approach the tower. Another finger-head complains that that same helpful NPC does nothing but repeat the same stories over and over. That little bit of meta-humour is one example of the irony pervading this game (the game as a whole suggests enough self-awareness and self-reference that I would even call it a metafiction), and drawing attention to the cynicism, alienation and monotony that sums up the existence of these characters. The finger-heads are metonymous embodiments of pure labour, the index finger. An apt symbol of the dehumanized worker bee.

That tower. It’s just a blank, ebony cube. It stands solitary and authoritatively, ominously tucked away in the far left corner, three floors down. It takes in-game days of waiting, doing the same things, and talking to the same people, for the sign to be removed so I can see what I’m missing.

But when I first descend onto this floor, I encounter on my left a vendor selling “Useless Junk,” “Soggy Fries,” and “Cold Coffee.” One of the items, “A Picture of Her,” seems to do nothing. A few raise HP, but most are as useless as their descriptions, which suggests an extreme anhedonia in the protagonist. These items will, however, come in handy as I slowly form a party.

Later on, I’ll need to take my party into combat, and as I face stronger enemies I’ll need this crappy food to sustain both my



own HP and that my companions. My first companion is a finger-head who implies mysteriously that he was sent by some unknown force. I am given no choice to decline or accept his offer, so my lack of response is taken as affirmative consent. This happens throughout the game. Every time I am given an ostensible choice, I am basically required to do whatever the system, speaking through the NPCs, suggests I should do. I am more pliable, in my silence, than the most obsequious yes-man. It is for this reason I suggest saving a lot, just in case you forget the game's title.

As I walk right, I am confronted by monsters called cobolds, some kind of cyborgian mix of animal and machine that I'm forced to engage in battle, and they're mostly easy to defeat. Considered pests, they're the first real hint of imperfection in the rigid structure of this walled city. Because the architecture is so grey and brutalistic, I might expect a clean and sanitized world. But it's like a sewer, full of vermin.

I descend.

As I move between the third floor and the basement, I must pass through the apartment of a finger-head quite different from anyone else I have met: its apartment is adorned with purple and pink wigs on busts, half-melted candles, scarves and boas. Before I'm allowed to pass to the next room, the finger-head demands I give it a gift out of hospitality. But this unusual

finger-head is reasonable enough to understand that I wasn't given fair warning before entering its home. So it allows me to "pretend" we're performing this exchange. I grab one of the items it already owns, a distinctive-looking candle, and hand it back over. I am thanked, enthusiastically, and allowed to continue.

This little task is incongruous to the rest of the game world, at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile. This particular interaction could be defined as hostile: it's an aggressive act of hospitality that I'm being coerced into performing. On the other hand, it's one of the few instances in the game that even approximates what might be called a human gesture.

The encounter hints at an RPG trope that will soon come into sharper focus—a trade cycle. Here, the trade is unitary and I'm only exchanging an item for my ability to move freely, but it's also strangely subversive in the way it's presented as a critical necessity. In other games it would be treated like more of a sidequest than a major plot element. It's centrality to the plot could be read as a forced interaction for Ollie, but also a materially substantial form of communication for him. If he speaks, he dies, but if he hands over a flower, then he gets something in return. Ollie can only speak through the transaction of goods, through trade, as if the collection and exchange of items can bring some meaning to his life.

Later on, I will be tasked with clipping the ears of a sentient (and very loquacious) flower to be traded for an entry ticket to a night club. I give this flower to a finger-head, without really consenting to do so, and I'm given what will become a ticket to the only place in this world I haven't explored, perhaps the final step to some kind of victory or freedom from this hell I have fashioned for myself.

I meet this finger-head in the library where Ollie apparently lives and works. The library is at the deepest end of the dwellings, well past the candle connoisseur and a dilapidated, fenced alley where an NPC resembling a bottle of alcohol asks for pills at the door. Pills are this world's currency. When he asks, all I can say is,

“...”

The library is not well-kept; it's more like a night club, with rave music and flashing lights. I press a big red button and suddenly all the fun stops. The lighting normalizes, and the muzak returns. I personify doldrums. I can only listen to finger-heads, talking tea kettles, and facsimiles of alcohol muse about loneliness, loss, anxiety, disaffection, solipsism, and malaise. Some innocently ponder love or art, but always wistfully, with a tinge of detached resignation and yearning.

My one job is to organize the books in the library, but there's only one book. Ollie

is illiterate, and hopes, half-heartedly, to someday learn how to read, or so the narrator tells me. He works every day with a neglected culture from which he is completely cut off. He dreams about working in the library, then waking up to do the same thing again. In his dream, he works. He organizes the “books,” and the narrator tells me “they” are very proud. It's hard to say if these omniscient bits of text are narrating Ollie's true internal feelings or if they are only semi-omniscient. I suspect they represent the “system” speaking, and I suspect that system is synonymous with that sinister tower I'm supposed to avoid.

Of course I don't avoid it because why would I? Of course the second an NPC tells a player not to do something, that's an unspoken implication that doing the discouraged thing is the best way to get a reaction. It's Eve eating the apple: had she not, nothing would have changed. Humanity would have remained trapped in the totalitarian toddler stage that Eden represents. So of course, after a monotonous, aimless drudgery spanning several library dream episodes, I behold this colossal, inscrutable thing. And then a creeping fog comes.

I'm never quite able to reach the source of power within these towers or discover where it might be located (the code itself, perhaps?). I'm never able to see its face or challenge it. I can only provoke it and witness the consequences. The walls

outside the library glitch vividly. A pall like a smog cloud overtakes the dwellings. There are many more cobolds than before, and those soggy fries and other useless garbage become necessities for survival. The finger-heads become more erratic, their speech and appearance more bizarre. On the first floor, one appears with a KFC bucket on his head. At one point, I wake up and the world has stretched out and mirrored itself. I walk to the far right and there's another tower, this one ivory. A colour-inverted finger-head says that capitalism will tell me what I want to hear, but will never fill up the hole inside me. Every night, a few new dreams join the old recurring nightmare.

In one of the new dreams, my finger-head companion has become lucid, and asks if indeed we're dreaming at all. Ollie doesn't even get the fake choice to answer, but it's obvious by then that these "dreams" are being manipulated by the same overwhelming structure that has tyrannized my days. Once I've provoked the structure, the same omniscient narrator that told me "they" were proud is suddenly very disappointed in me. In the most vivid of these dreams, I'm walking along an almost empty, purgatorial white space where I eventually reach a stack of books. I do my job.

These days, when the world is glitching, twisting, and corrupting, I realize that my "choices" which affect the world are

only exposing how broken it is. But more than that, I'm exposing, with my relative freedom of mobility, how interrogating this unseeable power has simply resulted in the world getting bent out of shape. I keep looking for the climax to this speculative tale of vigilante anti-authoritarianism, but it doesn't happen. Day in and day out, I work, dream, and survive, as my pathetic attempts to challenge power go unrewarded. There is no apparent solution.

I play *Don't Talk to Them!!* feeling like the picaresque hero of Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*. Sam Lowry dreams of being the hero of his own story in which he dismantles an Orwellian bureaucracy through the sheer power of love and determination. The film builds tension through Lowry's slow transformation. At first, he is more like the apathetic Ollie. Later, he accepts and articulates his disaffection for the system that employs him as revolutionary rage. On the one hand, Lowry, privileged and insinuated in the bureaucracy of this menacingly hegemonic world, seems to be in the perfect position to affect change. On the other, what drives him is a kind of narcissism that allows him to believe that he can affect change more or less himself, which leads to his being captured. In the end, he lapses into a blissful delusion after being tortured by his former best friend and suffering the trauma of his lover's death. In the end, he's forced to retreat to the English countryside and to the utopia inside of his own head. He escapes his



slogging, stunted existence, but he fails to change the conditions that produced it.

It's a heartbreaking film, but one also gets the sense that Lowry is being punished for his hubris. Gilliam created the film as a satire of real-world bureaucracies, and his protagonist is a jauntier Winston Smith. But the protagonists in the dystopias of *1984* and *Brazil* are round, fleshed out humans whose development arcs are fairly easy to trace. *Don't Talk to Them!!*, as an RPG, benefits from a more novelesque tradition than other videogame genres, but it still presents a silent, flat protagonist with static emotional development. But this is also cleverly sent-up: most games use the hero as a cipher to suggest ideas of quiet strength, wanderlust, and confident subscription to notions of justice as defined by the game's ideology. Here, Ollie doesn't seem to stand for much of anything. He just does whatever the system tells him to do: go to work, give me a candle, stack the books, give me a flower, and so on and so forth. He also, naturally, is only doing what I make him do. I have some ability as an actor in the world, but Ollie's just my deflated, demoralized puppet.

Can I say *Don't Talk to Them!!* is punishing Ollie in the same way *Brazil* punished Lowry? I think there's an important distinction here, because Lowry, like other dystopian figures, is written with his own motivations, not as a container for the viewer to fill up and control. Eventually,

he becomes an underdog that you root for, and when the film punishes Lowry it also admonishes the viewer for hoping too much for a happy ending. It reminds the viewer that in this situation, much like Smith combating Big Brother, Lowry is in way over his head. We are given an Icarus-esque lesson that's unsatisfying, but sobering.

Ollie, however, doesn't seem to contain any real motivations of his own. He's a personification of several ideas: loneliness, loss of self in the corporate milieu, cynical resignation, depression and anxiety, disenfranchisement to the point of voicelessness. When Sam dreams, he dreams of being a superhero in a fantastical world. When Ollie dreams, he dreams of working in a basement library. But the player, expecting a traditional RPG, is looking to redeem and to find closure, to locate the fix that saves Ollie and everyone else, to win. There is a dissonance between the cynical fatalism suggested by Ollie and the conventional RPG expectations I have of a fatalism more fortuitous and rewarding. Ollie is a container for my motivations, but he's not really tailored to them, and so his role as a silent hero is subverted yet again. Aggressively, I seek to take on the system, to push against these structures without ever asking if Ollie is really the man for the job.

It becomes clear that it isn't Ollie's hubris being punished here, as I waste my time

spending in-game days approaching the tower and waiting for something other than chaos and disarray to happen. I keep hoping for the system to yield, but it keeps refusing. There are two doors, side by side, on the third floor. If I try to open them, I'm told the buildings behind them are under construction. They stay that way for the entire game.

I become impatient. Idly pacing, I try to agitate the world into breaking in some advantageous way. I become stalled, and it's entirely my fault. I have not realized how to get the ticket to go into that strange club. It's the only thing I haven't experienced, and I'm determined to figure it out. It's at this point that the trade cycle, which I'd failed to understand at first, is unavoidable. The more I think on it, the more I start to put things together. The scissors in my inventory must cut the ears of the flower, the third member of my party. The flower can't stand loud noises, so I can't enter the library without its ears being trimmed. My first flower had run away when I entered the library for the first time, so I had to wait for days to get another one. Trimming hurts the flower. It seems cruel, but in a way, all the "choices" I've made have seemed cruel in some way.

When I finally have the flower in the library, a finger-head tells me his story, and I am compelled to give my party member away. The ticket is my reward. Things are falling into place. There are no hidden secrets. I

just needed to pay more attention.

I can't enter the club until the right day, when the hand plaque turns blue. When I walk in things are a mess. The music is jarring and metallic, the room is littered with garbage and finger-heads. I can't seem to do much other than allow them to speak at me, until I speak to the right one. It asks me if I want it to be over, and all of my dialogue options are the same: "Yes."

Finally, I am robbed not of my right to speak, but of my right not to speak, of my will to decline. But I have observed, correctly, that will isn't something Ollie desires but what I desire for him. Ollie's last word is a resounding, uncluttered affirmative.

And finally, I come to the Game Over screen I had been carefully avoiding. I saved frequently, I read the dialogue options closely, and I submitted myself to the banality of an RPG grind entirely of my own making. The game didn't make me spend days upon days artificially inflating my time spent with it. I just failed to engage with it properly. I kept looking for a means to "beat" the game, but now, looking at my Game Over screen, I realize I had the wrong idea all along. I should have been paying attention to the path Ollie was already on. I should have been paying attention to what he could actually do, rather than forcing him to assume some grand, pompous heroism.

Of course, this narrative arc more or less follows the tragic path plotted out in dystopias like *Brazil* or *1984*, but there are some things that become clear to me in retrospect about just what kind of failure Ollie is, and I am, enduring. Things start to fall into place.

*Sam Ollie Philip Sism.*

*The silent hero. The exploited puppet.*

*Married to scissors. Married to pain.*

*The pills he uses as currency instead of taking.*

*The NPCs that look like work and other symbols of self-destruction.*

*The garbage food. The unsatisfying consumerism. The means to survive.*

*The oppressive monotony of space and time.*

*The menial work. The place of rest.*

*The trade cycle. The closest thing to intimacy Ollie gets.*

*The faceless, uncaring evil. The invisible hand of capitalism.*

*The cobolds. The imperfections dragged out.*

*The picture of her.*

*The day he died.*

This is the game's last irony, its final formal subversion. It ends on a Game Over screen. This game is a trenchant critique of the pulverizing mechanisms of capitalism and its inability to help people suffering from mental illness. By satirizing RPG tropes within a dystopic narrative arc, it works as an illustration of how "unproductive" emotions or ideas are erased or sidelined, and how inescapable that can feel. But *Don't Talk to Them!!* also works as a psychoanalytical character study, blurring the lines between Ollie's dreams and waking life, unifying ludic, aesthetic and literary devices to suggest the nightmare

this person is living in. That's what I get for solving what was right in front of me. And yet I didn't see what was right in front of me.

Ollie can't win. Ollie isn't given a chance, and there's no suggestion that he wants to try. In fact, there's even some suggestion, in retrospect, that he was driven to this final moment. I remember how my finger-head friend was sent to me. There's still uncertainty around who the voice in those narrator boxes even is. This is never resolved. And every brow-beating aspect of this totalitarian system is telling me one thing: escape. But the only kind of escape that's possible is simply not to play. The only way to make the system stop isn't by destroying the system. Ollie is instead brought to the final squalid corner where he must destroy himself, and I led him there. He doesn't learn to love Big Brother or retreat into his own head. Love definitely does not conquer all.

It's not even martyrdom, it's suicide.

Ollie is focalized by a world that refuses to let him speak, and yet I didn't predict all of that leading up to precisely this moment. The idea that his speaking at all leads to a Game Over suggests that keeping silent in this oppressive system is the means to survive it, but it's impossible to keep it up. The other NPCs can speak to their heart's content, but for Ollie to do so means death, which shows the extent to which Ollie feels alienated and isolated. His special power that justifies him as the protagonist is loneliness, not agency. Because the game offers no alternatives, it would have been gentler to allow Ollie his Game Over screen when I screwed up on my first play session. But that's only after seeing it all laid out before me.

There were no hidden secrets in this game. Ollie was telling me all along. I just didn't pay attention.

*You can play Don't Talk To Them on eoeoeo344's  
GameJolt page.*



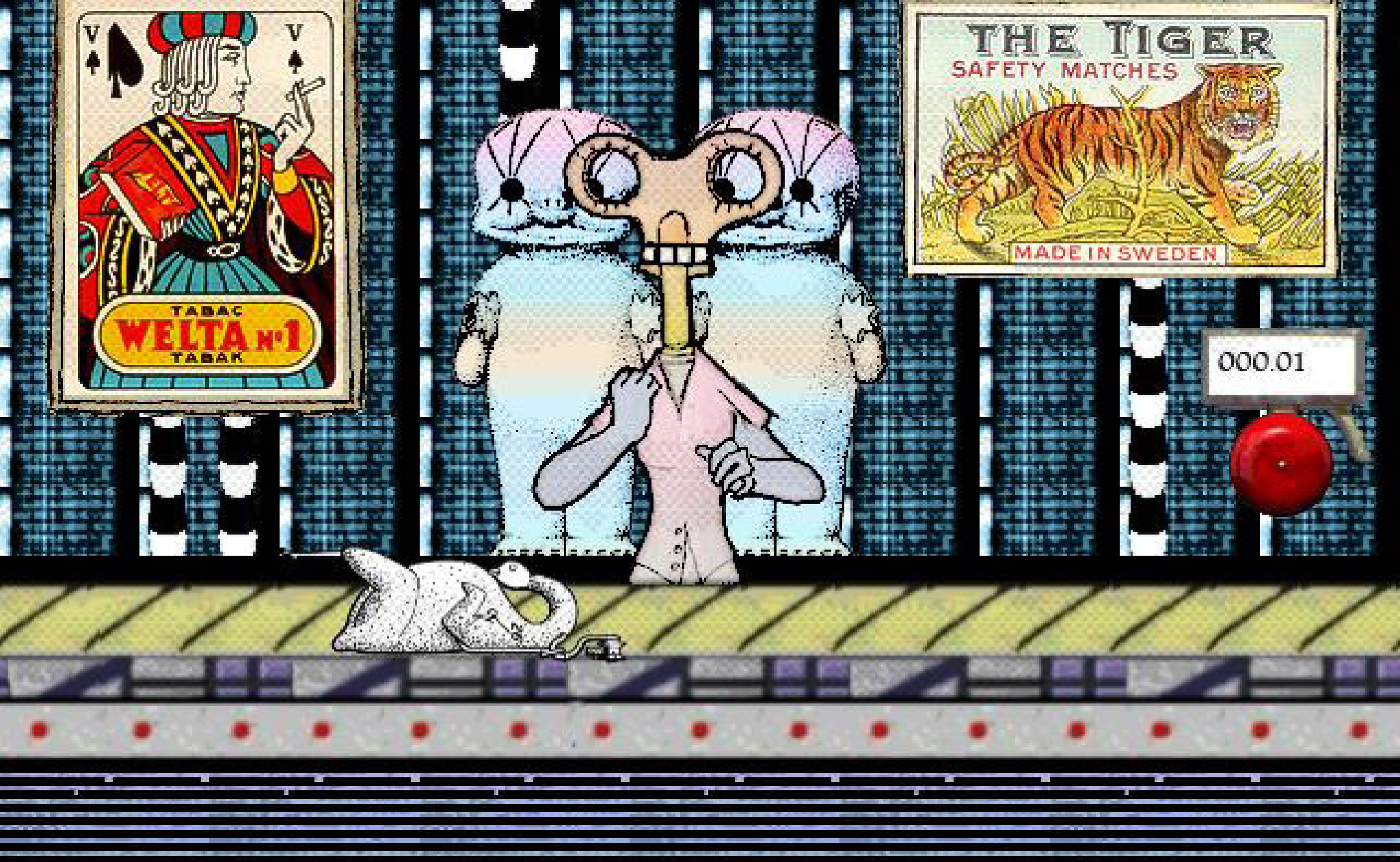
# GINGIVA

John Clowder (2013)

*By Emilie Reed*

Poor Gingiva. Her productivity has fallen, so she's been locked away in solitary confinement, due to be retrieved for intervals of corporal punishment, all for the sake of restoring her love of toil. In *Gingiva*, John Clowder retains his signature use of collage and surrealist imagery that he established in the visually stunning and open-ended *Middens*. But *Gingiva*, a spiritual successor to *Middens*, is mechanically different in several important ways. In *Middens* you roam freely and pick fights, firing your revolver at NPCs mostly indifferent to your presence. *Gingiva*, however, is more tense and linear. Once *Gingiva* escapes her prison, she is constantly on the run, and pursued. These changes in pacing and narrative show the distinction between playing as an implied male character and one explicitly coded as female.

There are no men at the factory where *Gingiva* works, besides the holographic projections of the Magistrate and two toady salarymen who oversee production. The workers all look alike, turnkey heads, barefoot, wearing girlish white dresses that cut off at the knees. Even though *Gingiva* has, presumably, been working at the factory for a while, the game offers no access to any sort of currency. She longs for the possibilities associated with cigarettes and even 'children' that appear in vending machines, but she has no funds of her own to acquire them. Either she does not receive payment, or her wages are such a pittance that they can't even buy her a single pack of cigarettes. Society in *Gingiva* is maintained by the work of the economically disempowered, and yet what the practically invisible upper class does with the doodads the factories produce is never revealed. Nor is any fairly recompensed form of labour presented as an option for the turnkey women. Instead of relying on gold and item shops, staples of the RPG genre, *Gingiva* must be resourceful, stealing items off enemies (and sorting through a lot of garbage in the process) or chasing after scraps of paper that blow across the screen.



Despite the uncertainty involved in using gathered items, and not knowing when more will be available, *Gingiva* has one consistent way to heal herself. Turnkey women have their heads removed and replaced through a special process, described in the game as “turning a beetle into a butterfly.” This turnkey-where-a-head-should-be is what allows *Gingiva* to recharge between battles. Press “Z” to crank her turnkey a few times, and health is restored. No need to stop at an inn. At the price of voice and individuality, she has become the perfect worker: one who can go on forever.

The game is surprisingly frank about the threat of sexual violence facing a lone woman wandering through a capitalist hellscape. ‘Your head will make a nice

ornament for my garden, and your body a nice ornament for my bed,’ taunts one of the Magistrate’s holograms. Unlike in *Middens*, where most altercations fall into a moral grey area, *Gingiva*’s encounters are often unambiguously kill or be killed, or potentially subject to traumatic gendered violence. Many of the wandering monsters that attack you fall into the creature design category of ‘phallic menace,’ but even more disturbing are the NPCs who drum up a conversation with you, asking your opinion on statements such as ‘It’s sometimes okay to hit a woman,’ followed by demands that you marry them no matter how you answer. You can choose to say ‘I do,’ which leads to *Gingiva* being confined to their house and producing fussy, chimeric offspring, an unconventional game over. While ‘I do

not' is also a choice, it means you'll have to fight your way out. Each suitor you destroy produces an eerie, codependent love letter, blaming their brief love for you for their situation and downfall. Again, the turnkey women of *Gingiva*'s universe are only seen by NPCs in terms of their labour value, whether it be through cheap factory work or maintaining the household and producing children, both essential, yet monetarily devalued tasks. This is a strange, disorienting switch of RPG tropes, just like the lack of currency and item shops. Whereas NPCs in RPGs are usually a means to an end, in *Gingiva* it's clear that, instead, the NPCs see you that way.

The swirling, hazy soundtrack and collage-style graphics that use both traditional drawings and creative commons clippings from various printed material make *Gingiva*'s world simultaneously surreal, scary, and inviting. The environment calls to mind the early days of mechanical reproduction. Not only does this aesthetic complement *Gingiva*'s narrative of escaping a repetitive factory job, but it represents a precursor to the digital reproduction that makes *Gingiva*'s style and distribution possible. RPG-Maker is an open and accessible platform with a community that's friendly to remixing existing art and ideas. John Clowder's digital collage fits in with the many other surreal, exploratory games that call the platform home. *Gingiva* does, however, suffer from a common setback of RPGM games that use the engine's battle system.

Extraneous battles quickly become repetitive back-and-forths, and in some places steep difficulty curves or swarming groups of enemies can lead to a few too many frustrating Game Over screens. Because there's no 'flee' mechanic, battles can drag on in a way that interrupts the trance-like exploration and narrative that makes the game worthwhile. The threat of aggression is core to the game's meaning, but I often found myself wishing that generic enemy encounters were less frequent, and that the tense, narrative-dense faceoffs with suitors and salarymen were more prominent.

*Gingiva* is a game about how capitalism inscribes itself on the body, through discipline, control, and implicit expectations. It is also about the struggle to escape this systemic violence. The mechanical stand-in for *Gingiva*'s head, which alienates her from both her mind and her mouth while turning her into a being that is only suited to work, parallels the metaphorical mechanization of our bodies through the scheduling and behavioural demands of alienated labour in a capitalist society. The disembodied set of chatter teeth that frees her from the cell and becomes her journey companion represents another 'inconvenient' part removed from factory workers before management would eventually decide that it was more effective to remove the entire head. The few remaining 'wild' sets of teeth are considered noisy pests. When she regains her missing parts, however, *Gingiva* isn't immediately changed



from mechanized, unpaid labourer to self-aware and empowered woman. It is less a turning point and more a culmination of the gradual process of inquisitiveness, perseverance and resistance, which has sustained *Gingiva* throughout her journey. *Gingiva*'s journey frequently brought to mind the behaviours I force on myself, concealing aspects of my personality, working against my body's needs and limiting how I express myself, not just to fit in, but to be read as suitable for work, not looking for trouble, a 'well-adjusted' and acceptable woman. *Gingiva* is an important game that not only makes these issues explicit, but does so with a concern for how they specifically effect women.

One of the most visually compelling elements of the game, 'Drolleries,' are particularly interesting in this context. Received when *Gingiva* meets a god or

defeats a boss, Drolleries allow her to recognize parts of her inner self, parts presumably neglected while she worked at the factory. Activating a Drollery takes you to a small cartoonish world that is initially empty but gradually fills up with colourful, chatty creatures. In *Gingiva*, finding yourself, and making a space for yourself in a world that demands women be changed from beetles to butterflies, is not about one great reclamation at the climax of the story, but about process, an internal journey as much as the archetypal journey essential to RPGs. *Gingiva* is a game about a lone woman fighting for scraps of agency in a world that pushes back at every small victory. Although *Gingiva* never speaks, because she has no mouth, the sense of her internal world, her emotions and struggles, is equally as compelling as the eerie and beautiful environments she wanders through.

*You can download Gingiva from its [GameJolt](#) page.*

# ILLOGICAL JOURNEY OF THE ZAMBONIS

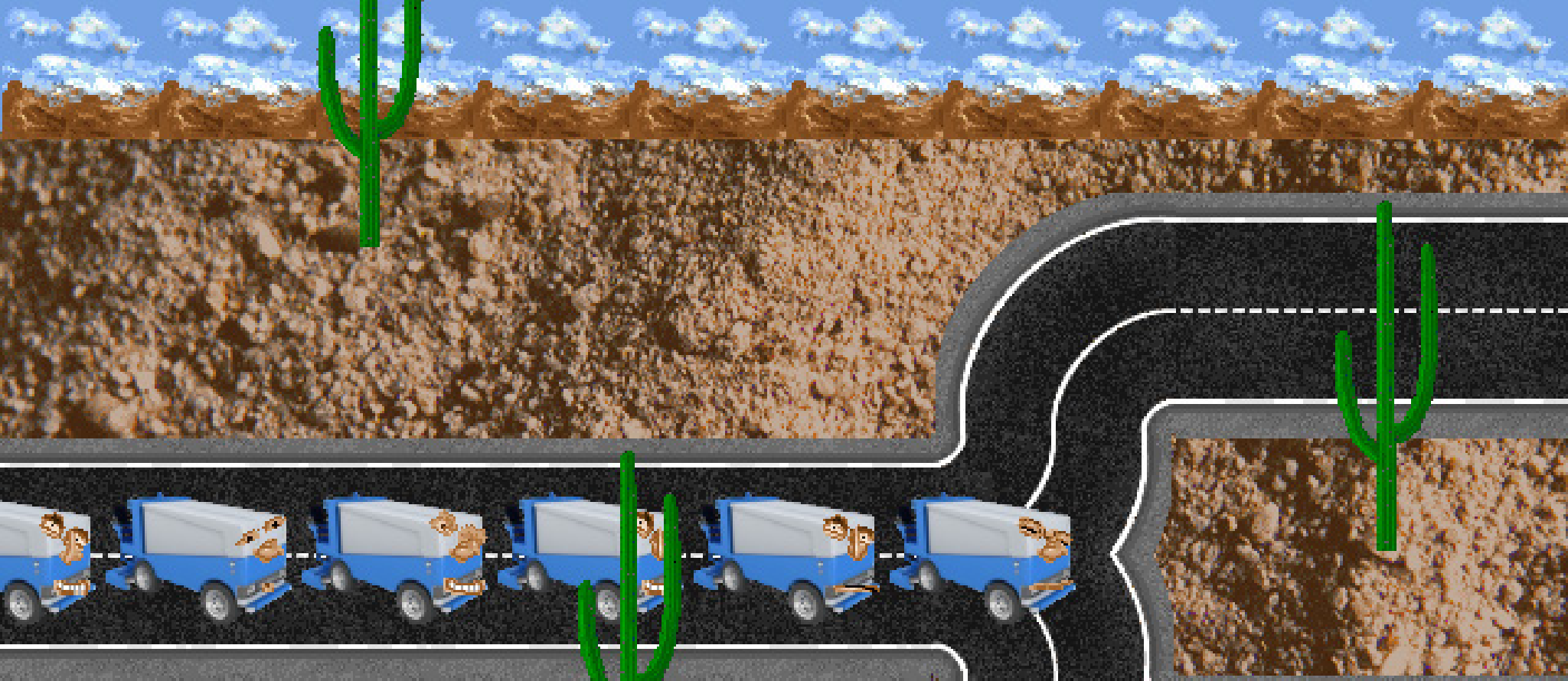
Noyb (2014)

*By Alex Pieschel*

The faceless Bloats have swindled the hapless Zoombinis. The Bloats promise to help the Zoombinis “grow their businesses” and “expand their trade routes.” What happens instead is the Bloats drive out the Zoombinis by “stealing profits, cancelling holidays, and piling on work.” The eccentric narrator points out that you can only push workers so far “before they take matters into their own hands (uh...so to speak).” The parenthetical riffs on the fact that the Zoombinis, cute n’ round n’ blue, don’t have hands. Their bodies don’t include a means for manipulating objects; they exist only as packages to be delivered. As player, it is your job to shuttle them towards some vague utopia far away from the shackles of the bloated Empire.

Why am I writing about 90s educational game *Logical Journey of the Zoombinis* in an arts magazine? For one, it is practically impossible to divorce the history of using computers to make art from the history of using computers to try and force people to learn things. For another, Western education historically has justified art as a moral imperative. We read Literature, for example, because it is good for us. But the morality argument is also a smokescreen for an ideology of knowledge acquisition as practical workplace skill that might help us ascend to the managerial class. Art is always pushing back against the twin mandates of morality and productivity, trying to reinvent itself and justify its existence for its own sake. Education sits at the awkward intersection of art-politics & commerce-knowledge.

And like art, pedagogy is always political. Every lesson has subtext, and the unspoken assumptions that get left out reveal just as much as the contents. In a critique written in 1997, Bill Bigelow challenges conventional nineties wisdom about *The Oregon Trail*, an edutainment darling first designed in 1971, later released in many updated versions in subsequent decades. Bigelow points out that while the game teaches you about common mid-nineteenth century ailments like dysentery, and simulates the geography and commerce from Missouri to



## Pizza is a finite resource.

Oregon, your perspective is limited to that of a white male whose motivations are to acquire territory and harvest resources; survive in order to dominate. The implied purpose seems to be empathetic, to make you feel what life was really like for people on the trail, but *Oregon Trail* elides issues of race and gender, presenting a superficial, tokenized multiculturalism that erases the experiences of marginalized people. History as problem to be solved from the perspective of an individualistic, patriarchal, imperialist worldview. What gets left out are experiences that could challenge that worldview.

Similarly, in a critique of another early edutainment game, Ansh Patel points out that *Lemonade Stand's* (1979) capitalist utopia omits competition and chance, two factors that would complicate the game's simple supply-and-demand ideology. Here

the player is fortunate to host the only supply of lemonade in a neighborhood with unquenchable demand. Customer automations persist through rain or shine, just lower your prices when it rains and they still show up. *Lemonade Stand* portrays the ideal market as one in which all competing businesses have been subsumed underneath one Ur-business that can safely manipulate prices and mine consumers. Just as much as they teach, *Oregon Trail* and *Lemonade Stand* indoctrinate. Or put more gently, they teach a particular discourse, a specific way of looking at and navigating the world.

So what discourse does *Logical Journey of the Zoombinis* teach? The company responsible for this game was itself caught up in a bloated machinery of expanding retail markets. For many years, Brøderbund was a relatively modest but successful software



company that served a niche market, both developing in-house and producing many of its educational games since 1985, when it released *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?*, a founding title of the edutainment industry aimed at ten to fourteen-year-olds. *Zoombinis*, an appropriate 90s follow up to 80s-Carmen's modest multiple-choice mystery solving, took full advantage of the mighty CD-ROM virtual disk drive with slick sounds, pastoral palettes, and winsome animations. *Zoombinis* was released in 1996, as the companies that developed and produced educational software were beginning to converge into corporate colossi. Brøderbund's stock fell almost \$60 a share between 1995 and 1997: "Once a haven for the creative, known for the demarcation between creators and 'the suits,' Brøderbund was forced to institute a system of cost controls more closely resembling traditional management models". Over the next few years, Brøderbund would be swallowed up in a series of mergers, first bought up by the Learning Company which laid off 500 Brøderbund employees. The Learning Company was then purchased by Mattel, which in turn gave away the combined company after bleeding money from the deal; the holdings that included Brøderbund's educational and entertainment titles were eventually sold to Ubisoft and Riverdeep. As a shrinking number of companies continued to expand and monopolize from the late 90s through the early 2000s, the edutainment retail business became unsustainable.

What is striking about *Logical Journey of the Zoombinis* is how smoothly it integrates mathematical thinking into a story that tricks children into learning, or at least thinking. At the beginning of the game you can customize your Zoombinis by choosing different types of feet (or springs or propellers), glasses, and noses. In a Let's Play of the game, the player optimizes the group of sixteen by providing as little variation as possible. For example, in the player's first group, most of the Zoombinis have the same nose, but their noses are different colors. This approach allows the player to more efficiently sort the Zoombinis and quickly discover which features the puzzle gatekeepers dislike. Differences in appearance are trivial for the Zoombinis, but these differences are all the game world notices about them, especially the gatekeepers, terraformed parts of the landscape itself. In one puzzle, a smuggling rock chirps, "We must be selective about our clientele." As player, your role is to shepherd and force the naïve utopians to play by the rules of Empire. In the context of this universe, the lessons of "sorting, organizing and analyzing data, hypothesis formation, set theory, logical reasoning, pattern finding, attribute comparison, and algebraic thinking" establish a hierarchy of bio-power mechanisms that the player must learn to help the Zoombinis survive.

A growing number of homebrew and freeware titles parody edutainment, including *Frog Fractions* (2012), *Bubsy 3D*:

*Bussy Visits the James Turrell Retrospective* (2013), and *Pleasuredromes of Kubla Khan* (2012). These games use edutainment as a framework to make absurd, surreal departures from its genre conventions. All of the aforementioned are delightful in different ways, but there is also something plaintive in the urgency of their escape from the generic constraints they allude to, that points to the disassociated, disembodied sense of playing a game with a didactic purpose and enthusiasm at odds with the internal logic of its fiction.

*The Illogical Journey of the Zambonis* is a jilted love letter of a game by developer-writer-curator Noyb. *Zambonis* was made with Multimedia Fusion 2, old software designed for kids to make games in school, and uploaded to the site Glorious Trainwrecks in November of 2014. *Zambonis*, using *Zoombinis* as its point of reference, shifts emphasis away from logic puzzles and towards a story that interrogates the Zoombini universe specifically, and the edutainment universe more generally, hamming up the exodus narrative but at the same time foregrounding its cruelty. On its face the game doesn't pretend or even aspire to present its ideas in subtle or sophisticated form. Rather, its counter-ideology is embedded in its means of production - the ghost town of gamemaking software - and in its context - the glorious trainwreck culture in which it chooses to participate.

For a game so clearly fond of its source material, *Zambonis* thoroughly picks apart its own nostalgia. Writing and voice-acting take center stage as the puzzles are revealed to be preordained, illogical, and irrelevant. The title screen shows an infinite avalanche of clip-art trucks with strange, chopped up, pasted on faces endlessly falling through space-time. The scene is accompanied by a toneless accapela loop of the word "Zamboni" repeated over and over ad nauseam. Pictured here is the grim existential horror of the edutainment multimediverse. Click "New Game," and a short introduction voiced by a sad French philosopher tells of a sinister political faction that has gained enough power to exile the Zambonis from their homeland. The next screen shows an anchored ship and a shuffle board of facial features: four sets of eyes, four noses, and four mouths. It is clear that you should customize the truck cyborg creatures with different faces, but at this stage there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the activity, so you are content to send a random assortment of sixteen on their way.

The first puzzle presents two precarious looking bridges over a deep chasm overlooked by two garish faces. The faces greet the Zambonis with flamboyant cowboy voices that sound sort of like Kenneth from 30 Rock. They warn that they might sneeze as the Zambonis try to cross, propelling anyone who gets caught in the crossfire to their death. They give

no clue as to what will trigger the allergy, but the layout of the scene implies that for each Zamboni one of the bridges will allow safe passage. You arbitrarily choose which Zamboni goes first, then arbitrarily choose which bridge that Zamboni must cross. The first two pass without incident, but the third is sneezed into the chasm. This is an interesting moment; the game lets you know where it stands and what its priorities are. Much narration is devoted to the Zambonis' reaction to their friend's death, stunned silence as the narrator describes their internal monologue. Intellectually, they knew that this could happen, but emotionally they were not prepared: "How absurd...Back home, their mortality never rested on a coin flip." The narration is deliberately overwrought, clearly melodrama. The game's humor deflects any attempts at solemn brooding, but by pausing the action it slips in some genuine reflection, forcing the player to listen and consider the loss of a small digital creature extinguished by the whims of an arbitrary obstacle course. Here is where *Illogical Journey of the Zambonis* differs from its source material. *Zambonis* is more interested in the ethical implications of sorting and elimination than it is in teaching and reinforcing these concepts, and it suggests that both mental exercises are equally instructive. After the first death, the narrator describes the terror and apprehension as *Zambonis* attempt subsequent crossings. One cowers as a face stifles a sneeze at the last moment. Another directs a "look of scorn" towards the faces

who fail to meet her gaze. The seventh tries to backtrack when he sees a face start to sneeze, but falls to his death before he can get away. As the tenth Zamboni falls, her surviving lover begs the mountain watchers for some insight into why she died instead of him. The face retorts that the lover should not read any "intent" into any of the Zambonis' deaths. Some will die, and some won't. After another casualty, the remaining Zambonis have given up on logical reasoning. Life is not a logic puzzle because death is a sneeze. The twelfth Zamboni tries prayer and is spared. The rest glide quietly across.

In the source material, the stakes are lower. *Zoombinis* features a little slapstick violence, but no tragic death. When the mountain faces sneeze, the Zoombinis are propelled backwards, and stars swirl around their heads. No death or mourning, simply trial and error, then try again. The elaborate narration and dialogue of *noyb's Zambonis* is a significant departure from Brøderbund's original. In *Zoombinis*, the mountain faces can't be bothered with conversation; they don't attempt to justify their reasoning. They simply sneeze when a Zoombini approaches with a facial feature or accessory that they can't tolerate. After so many sneezes, the bridge breaks, but even then there are no casualties. The Zoombinis simply return to a campsite where the player can retrieve them later. In *Zambonis*, however, there is no correct appearance that will allow certain creatures to cross one of the bridges, and creatures

are lost permanently if victimized by one of the puzzles.

At the next stage, your foe is a troll that demands pizza; you try to appease it, but quickly discover that it isn't interested in listening to reason. The troll is defined by what it dislikes (everything) rather than by what it likes, so presenting alternatives doesn't work. Conversation doesn't happen. The theoretical way to progress is trial and error, but these gatekeepers have no patience. They demand sacrifice. Another puzzle, in which Zambonis are floated over a canyon via bubbles (this game has a thing for treacherous drops and precarious transport), is even more explicit in its sorting based on "crude analysis of physical features." Bubbles carry the Zambonis over pre-defined paths, and the direction of these paths are determined by particular facial features—a specific set of eyes here, a particular nose there: "This system was designed for Zambonis to use, but not for their benefit," says the narrator, who highlights the mistaken "assumption that movement implies progress." The Zamboni puzzle recreates the Zoombini one faithfully, except this one is unsolvable. Upon pushing off in the bubble, one unfortunate Zamboni is trapped in a purgatory of looping paths. The remaining Zambonis turn around to take an alternate road, leaving their friend suspended.

Noyb's *Zambonis* teases out the idea that "logic" can be a paradigm invented by the privileged to justify their positions in the

world, and this paradigm is a discourse that is taught in schools. *Zambonis* shows us how Brøderbund's game felt like the real world, logical in a completely illogical way. *Zambonis* narrates the questions that a perceptive and curious child might ask about the logic of the Zoombini universe. Why is it like this? What is the point of these rules and whom do they serve? Why does this horrible troll keep throwing away perfectly fine pizza? Since the puzzles in *Zoombinis* allow you to try again, your creatures can be safely sacrificed to the process of elimination. This is comforting when compared to a world in which death and failure can be random and arbitrary, or even worse, systematically directed towards specific marginalized groups. But at the same time, *Zoombinis* is a world full of grids designed to filter for desired appearances, and the only way to determine the "correct" appearance is to "eliminate" the incorrect version. It's a logic that reinforces a patriarchal system of racialized, gendered hierarchies, and Brøderbund's educational game offers no alternative to this way of thinking.

But at the same time, *Zoombinis* is ambivalent and deceptive. The villainous bloats are capitalists, even if they are part of a cliché, not really subversive, "evil corporation" trope. The player is much more likely to empathize with the Zoombinis and view the gatekeepers, with their opaque regulations, as fickle and arbitrary. Players remember this game more for the characters than they do for



the rules by which they were forced to play. When kids played this game, they didn't passively absorb what meaning was already there; they imbued it with living meaning, fretting over it like a garden. In *Rock Paper Shotgun*, Phill Cameron writes, "instead of spring boarding me into a life of analytical thought, *Zoombinis* interested and enraptured me so because of the simplistic and iconic nature of their plight...I always knew the game was called *The Logical Journey*., but I never really realised, at least while playing, that it was supposed to be educational. There weren't any numbers, and all the problem solving was open to a level of guesswork and trial and error." *Zoombinis* managed to hook into a human empathy, and as Cameron points out, the game tricks the player into thinking logically, but does it also trick her into considering what might be wrong or crude about that logic? Can a game force a player into that level of interrogation, or is this up to the teacher?

I don't want to overstate noyb's *Illogical Journey of the Zambonis*. You might argue that all of its design decisions are a direct result of its limited scope, and you would probably be right. But even so, simply by existing, it helps fill in the blanks. This game shares its accomplishments with other games on the *Glorious Trainwrecks* site. By re-appropriating the disparate

shards of a complex consumer culture, these games collectively present an alternative that challenges dominant cultural standards of artistic, commercial, and human value. Transmitted through chopped up brokenness is a living games culture that recycles and reimagines the systems it emerges from. *Zambonis* critiques not by aspiring to be a polished product, but through its context and means of production. *Zoombinis* was nice because it made kids use their brains, but despite a few subversive undertones it still reinforces a logic that relies on sorting and gatekeeping, a logic that *Zambonis* rejects. This is why *Zambonis* feels so ambivalent, and at times you're not sure whether or not its overwrought bleakness is supposed to be funny. It's a game that knows it remembers *Zoombinis* fondly, but also recognizes that there was something strange about the lessons implied. As with *Oregon Trail*, most teachers probably didn't use *Zoombinis* as a jumping off point for discussions of systemic oppression and the limits of individualistic perspective, how the game's contradictions and gaps simultaneously undermine and reinforce its systemic logic. In order to recognize systemic issues, we have to purge internalized notions of rugged individualism, the fantasy that one great leader can dress up a passive multitude in respectable costume and shepherd them towards change.

*You can play Illogical Journey of The Zombonis on its  
Glorious Trainwrecks page.*

# SLAVE OF GOD

Stephen Lavelle (2012)

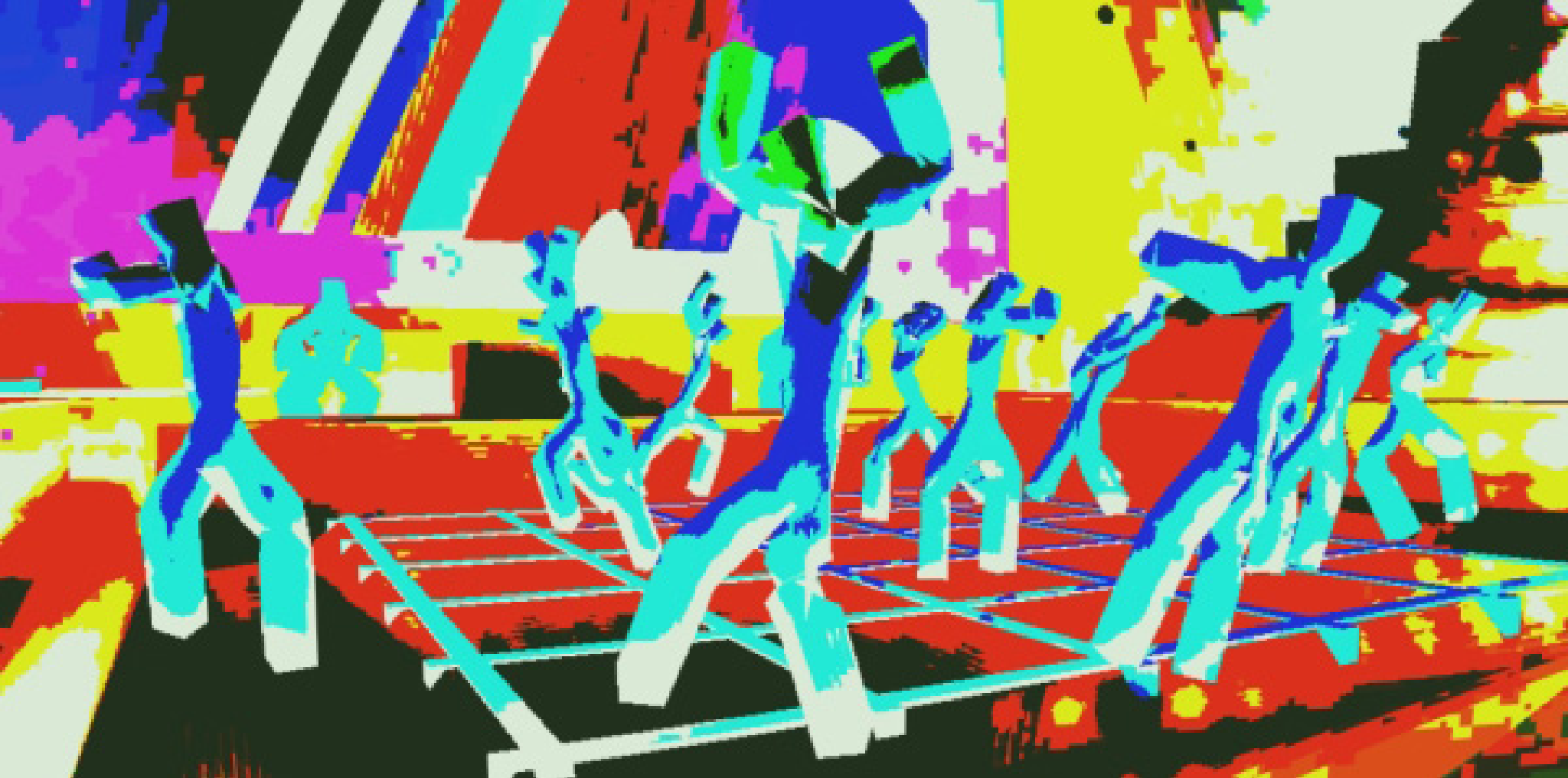
*By Ansh Patel*

Intentionality is a word that we, as critics and developers often seek when we think about experimental art games. Conveying the artists' intent while challenging the player is central to making art; but in games, it also implies that dynamic aspects like interactivity and player agency have to coexist with the static concept of the creator.

Part of the challenge comes from the nature of games as black box structures. Interaction always results in a response, but the underlying processes governing that always remain opaque to the player. Such opacity also leaves us wondering exactly how the intentionality of the developer translates into what we see and think. Is that really the intention of the developer or merely our own subjective interpretation of it?

Examining the game's source code provides us with a significant window into the developer's intentions. Here we see the blocks which hold traces of the developers' mind while working, be it in names of the object or a comment in code, providing us with potential hints into their true intentions when working on the project.

Intentionality is often a puzzle to be figured out in many of Stephen Lavelle's games. Most of his games are short-form, highly specific but purposely vague, drawing the player into a conversation about its purpose. *Slave of God* is an experimental game from Lavelle, who also goes by the name of increpare, which was released in 2012. Described as a realistic simulation of an experience in a night-club, *Slave of God* is an audiovisual overload, drowning the player with acid-rave music echoing through its corridors that are immersed in bright, rapidly flashing lights.



What is the beginning of a game? Is it what the player first sees when they start a game? Or is it what a developer first begins working on? That is the question that springs into my mind as I open the Unity3D source file downloaded from increpare's site.

Chronology holds meaning in a structural context only within the confines of an experience. As players, we don't have the paratext of the underlying concepts that a developer uses to frame our experience. This is particularly true for Unity3D, which divides the games into distinct "scenes". You can work on each scene independently without affecting the others. On top of this, it allows you to describe the chronology of these scenes when creating the playable files. So, as *Slave of God's* opens up inside Unity, I observe it has only two scenes:

### "MainScene"

The one where most of the game takes place in. This was the scene that I first saw when I opened the source Unity file. This means that this was the last scene Increpare was working on before making the final build of the game.

### "TitleScene"

Lasts for a very short time at the start of the game. Composed of only a camera and a bright sphere.

Note that even if *MainScene* was the one last accessed by the developer before releasing the game, it is by no means a definitive proof that it was the last one created during development.

So, I decide to find out the actual creation dates in the source folder. The “Date Modified” only confirms that the *MainScene* was the last thing Increpare worked on before releasing the game, on the same day, 30th December 2012 itself.

What’s puzzling is that there is a *MainScene* folder which was created more than a week before, but the folder is empty. This raises a question: was the *MainScene* originally residing in the folder, or is it merely a relic of a thought that never reached fruition? A folder left empty in the final build could imply considerable urgency from the developer, or merely an occurrence the developer chose to ignore.

But would such unfinished, abandoned ideas factor into the chronology? From a developer’s perspective, it certainly would. An unfinished idea may have simply been a diversion, but it was also the developer actively exploring the concept of a game. From a player’s perspective however, it simply doesn’t matter what was meant to be in the *MainScene* folder. Only the finalized chronology that the developer decided to release the game with counts in shaping the chronology of player’s experience.

Does *Slave of God* have really fancy visual scripting? As someone who has dabbled in

shader programming, this was a question I was intrigued to find the answer to before downloading the source files. It’s no secret that *Slave of God*’s visuals are unapologetically flashy, and fittingly so. Without the fast flashing lights that fully warrant a seizure warning, *Slave of God* wouldn’t be able to build the foundation of the night-club experience it seeks to emulate.

So, it came as a surprise to me when I found out that *Slave of God* had no fancy shader scripting, but instead used a combination of Unity3D’s default Image Effects and a *CameraMusicReact* scripted by the developer himself. Increpare had achieved strikingly unique visuals with little customization and smart usage of existing tools, but what surprised me more was how its music shaped the game’s visuals. Digging into the code of *CameraMusicReact* confirmed what the name had suggested: the Camera Effects—*Contrast Enhance*, *Fisheye* and *Motion Blur*—were indeed influenced by the game’s music. This came across as a revelation I would never have figured out as a player. Even if I knew that both the visuals and the audio were essential to the game’s purpose, I could never have imagined by simply playing, that they would be melded to one another in such a deeply intertwined manner.



```

1.  // Use this for initialization
2.  void Start () {
3.      al = GetComponent<AudioListener>();
4.
5.  }
6.
7.  public bool flicker = false;
8.  public float timescale=2.0f;
9.  // Update is called once per frame
10. void Update () {
11.     AudioListener.GetSpectrumData(samples, 0,
12.         FFTWindow.Rectangular);
13.     float t = Time.time*timescale;
14.     float r = Mathf.Cos(t*1.0f)/2.0f+0.5f;
15.     float g = Mathf.Sin(t*1.1f)/2.0f+0.5f;
16.     float b = Mathf.Sin(t*0.9f)/2.0f+0.5f;
17.     //Debug.Log (r+", "+g+", "+b);
18.
19.     if (flicker)
20.     {
21.         targetmat.color = new Color(Random.Range(0.0f,1.0f),
22.             Random.Range(0.0f,1.0f));
23.         flickermaterial.color = new Color(Random.Range(0.0f,1.0f),
24.             Random.Range(0.0f,1.0f), Random.Range(0.0f, 1.0f));
25.
26.     }
27.     else
28.     {
29.         targetmat.color = new Color(r,g,b);
30.         camera.fov = 60.0f+10*samples[2];
31.
32.
33.
34.         float r2 = samples[2]*5;
35.         float b2 = samples[16]*100;
36.         float g2 = samples[8]*50;
37.
38.         flickermaterial.color = new Color(r2, g2, b2);
39.         //new Color(Random.Range(0.0f,1.0f),
40.         //Random.Range(0.0f, 1.0f), Random.Range(0.0f,1.0f));
41.
42.     }
43.

```

The code of *CameraMusicReact* is fairly short but deeply formulaic and concise, a sign that the scripter knew exactly what they wanted to achieve. It first retrieves the spectrum data from the playing *AudioSource* through *FFTWindow* (the Rectangular component suggests the type of frequency wave) and then generates RGB samples on line 34-36. However, the part of the script that's most apparent from the player point of view are the *Mathf.Cos* and *Mathf.Sin* functions that are used to vary color of the textures in the night-club with time based on music. A lot goes on in those few lines, but the time-variant factor is important because it melds temporality of being in a night-club with the existence of flashing lights and music. The passage of time becomes associated with your two most dominant senses.

This comes across as a key, understated factor hiding in the game's black box – an element that's essential in finding what makes it work. *Slave of God* is no fancy experiment in visual scripting. Instead, it uses existing tools and elegant scripting to convey the experience of being in a night-club. Time loses its usual meaning, and instead becomes melded with the music track that's being played, which as it turns out, is also influencing the lights you see. If this is a comment on the immediacy of music in an environment where time loses its usual meaning, then *Slave of God* expresses that through its code but never making it explicit in the experience to its player.

How does the game convey its theme through AI behaviour and environment?

NPC and AI behaviours are often the ones most associated with an imprint of developer's intention. In many ways, they are microcosms of the game's larger black boxes, concealing their trigger conditions and behaviourism behind an opaque façade.

But that's the reason why they are often the most effective means of challenging player agency. The players cannot figure out whether it was their interaction or a script-induced trigger that caused the resultant behaviour. The existence of others in a virtual world whose behaviour, like ours, isn't always transparent, adds an additional layer of opacity, making it more challenging to grasp the game's overall system. In an art game, this is particularly important. Inviting the player to think has to be a lure that is subtle, but persistent enough to draw the player's attention.

*Slave of God* has plenty of obscure NPC interactions which generally raise questions like “*Why did that happen?*” “*Why did they just do that?*” These questions are typical of a player's mind, testing the black box comprising of the game's opaque systems, trying to find a pattern, hoping that it'll make the game's underlying meaning more apparent.

The NPC the player first meets in the corridor, whom within engine is simply titled “*BlueMan*” shows an interesting example.

```
// Blue Man Import Settings
using UnityEngine;
using System.Collections;

public class BlueMan : MonoBehaviour {

    NavMeshAgent nma;
    GameObject player;

    // Use this for initialization
    void Start() {
        //nma = GetComponent<NavMeshAgent>();
        player = GameObject.Find("Player");
    }

    //Update is called once per frame
    void Update() {
        //nma.SetDestination(player.transform.position)
    }
}
```

The *BlueMan* simply stands in the corridor waiting for the player to move. He is not what one would assume as the hand-holding guide who leads you into *Slave of God's* world. Instead, *BlueMan* jumps into action only after the player has progressed a few steps forward to a specific point, at which a script is triggered and the *BlueMan* starts following a set path to his fixed destination.

AIs whose only action is triggered by the player are unusual, so it made me wonder what I was really seeing here. Is this a way for the game to show how, under intoxication, the person's perception of reality becomes increasingly self-centered, turning other people into statues who don't act until the person does? I found a hint inside the game's repository of scripts where a *BlueMan* script

existed but it was not attached to *BlueMan*. When I look at the contents of the script however, my surprise fades away. Increps are intended to use the Navigation Mesh to move *BlueMan* at the very start of the game, but another idea made him comment out that behaviour. An idea which relied on the player's action triggering a soft beep and pushing *BlueMan* into the solitary action.

It's interesting to note the location that the *BlueMan* ends up at. The bar counter around the dance floor is oriented towards the dancers. *Slave of God* subverts the space of a nightclub and our familiarity with it. People sitting at the counter often use it to take a breather from dancing while still keeping an eye on the dance-floor. Many use it to have a better look at other people

in the club. Since *BlueMan* is clearly male by the identifier, this could also double as a critique of the male gaze in a nightclub, someone who isn't interested in dancing and merely wants to draw perverse pleasure from looking at people from afar.

Perhaps the most important and explicitly stated environmental design of *Slave of God*'s nightclub (named "*ClubFantasy*" inside the engine hierarchy) is the bathroom section. There is only the Men's section that the player can access. The women's section is simply blocked by a solid wall.

Blocked walls are often used as barriers in a game to hide the incomplete ideas behind them. Ideas orphaned during development by a lack of time or interest. But one can see that even from within the engine, this was a conscious decision right from the outset. The women's bathroom is blocked and it leads nowhere. Were the player somehow able to get through the wall, they'd only fall into an infinite abyss. The player can only enter the Men's section and partake in a weird and funny urinating minigame.

This can be seen as another example of *Slave of God*'s "perspective abstraction". *Slave of God* conceals and subverts our understanding of the nightclub. Oriented counters and blocked walls tell us something about the actors in the scene, including the *BlueMan*, and the abstraction of bathrooms implies the gender of the character we are playing as.

This feels like *Slave of God* making an important comment on the nature of games and how they are distinct from simulations themselves. The separation of the body from the self is something that's consciously aimed for in a "perfect simulation" (something we are not near achieving). Many games have attempted to simulate this, but fail to create a virtual space which allows for the participant to detach their physical sense of being from their virtual experience. Even in a game with intoxicating visuals like *Slave of God*, there are conscious design elements meant to remind you that you're controlling an anonymous puppet in this virtual space.

Many forms of art revel in vagueness and go beyond mere aesthetic pleasure to try engaging with their audience. For many works, the act of engaging is more than sufficient, and the consequent "answer" or meaning is often accessorial and beside the point. Interactive art, with its two-step process of action-effect through a black box can often amplify that feeling of vagueness. *Slave of God* has few elements which remain opaque to the player and to this critic who has dug into the engine code.

One of them involves falling down a small pit in a dark corner of the club to a sub-level where you're facing two burly figures. The music changes to something with a mischievous tone and you have to go down a long-winded passageway in order to make

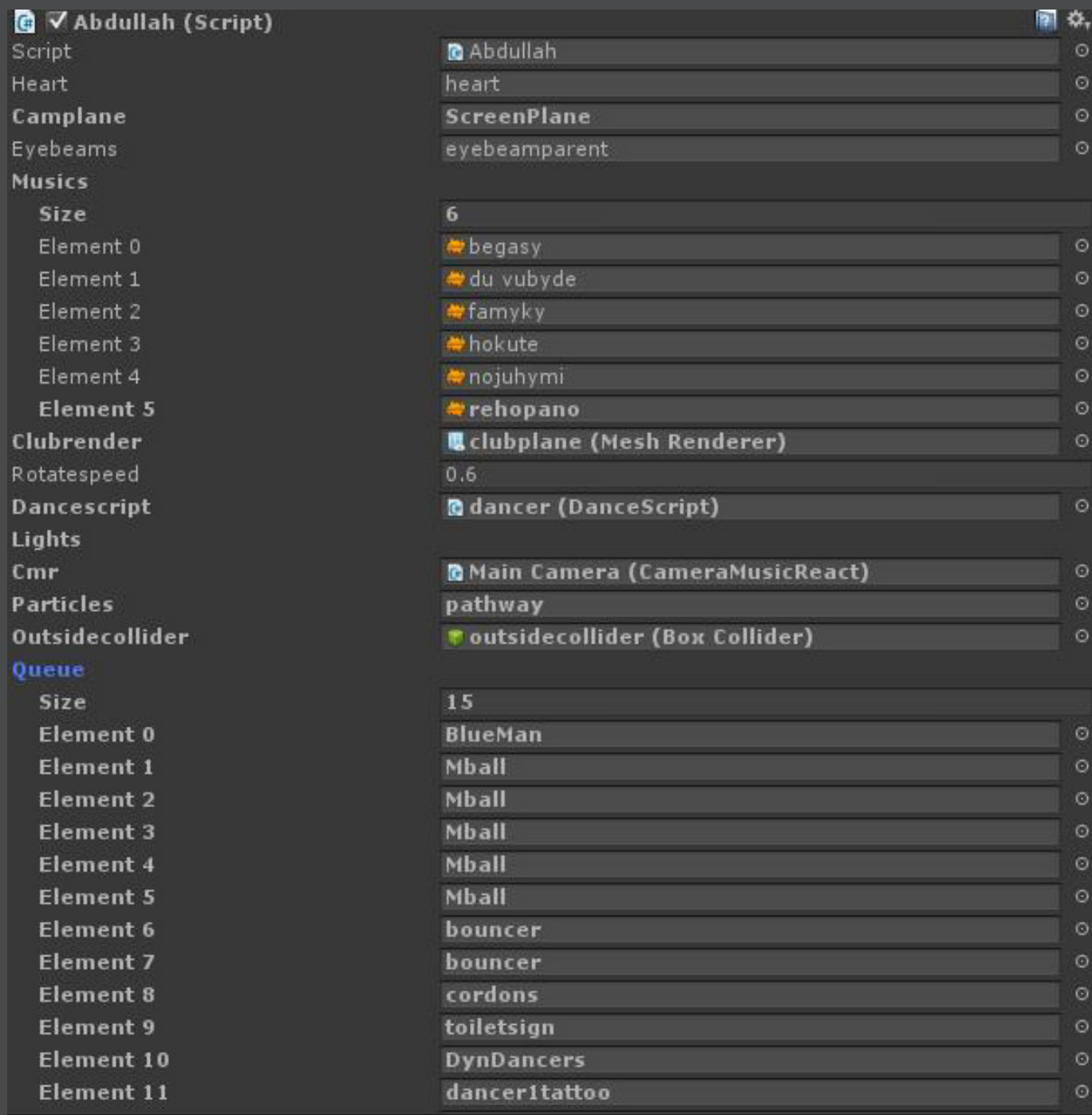




your way back to the dance floor. Upon returning you notice something weird, almost immediately. Your vision has gotten blurry and there is a consistent delay in what you're seeing. This is because falling down the pit triggers the *Motion Blur* camera effect within Unity's engine, which amplifies the feeling of intoxication for the next minute. What's strange is why it happened. Was falling down the pit a literal metaphor of taking drugs? Or did the two burly men give you something that drugged you? Looking at their identifiers in the engine, they're marked as "*bouncer*", and their models are the same as other *bouncers* in the nightclub. The "why" of the situation doesn't make absolute sense but perhaps the intoxication of a play-

er in a dark corner is never supposed to.

The title of the game is usually seen as an artist's clearest statement of intent. Something that isn't just going to draw the player into the game but will serve as a basis for its major themes. What appears to be the most amusing element of *Slave of God* turns out to be its most important, at least in terms of title. The central dancer on the floor, who when approached locks you with triangular meshes attached to its arms, almost as if that NPC has enraptured your player. Getting closer to him almost results in a brief interlude where rest of the club fades a little as you and the dancer form your own little universe. An actual heart forms up at the centre of this dancer



NPC and starts beating while you continue moving along with them. This is another example of the perspective abstraction and an interesting observation of how infatuation, even on the dance floor, shrinks the universe to include just the two of you. The player is free to walk away from this dance, which results in a large elongated rectangle protruding out from the dancer NPC's face for a few moments.

While all of this clearly plays out as a flirtatious exchange between strangers on a dance-floor, what's interesting to note is that the dancer is called "Abdullah" inside the Unity's object hierarchy. *Abdullah* translates literally as "a *slave of god*" in

Arabic. What's more, the *Abdullah* NPC in *Slave of God* has an eponymous script which contains almost all the major logic of the game. Right from switching to different tracks when the player enters specific areas of the nightclub to the activation of *Motion Blur* effect after falling down the pit of *Bouncers*.

This brings us to the most important question – one centred on the game's title itself. Within *Abdullah* lies all the instructions that *Slave of God* needs to exist. In a classic definition, an omniscient being would classify as a God-like entity. But despite having all that power, *Abdullah* is a slave himself. A slave to the code that bounds him. A slave to

the triggers that govern his action. A slave to the action of an unknown Player to provide meaning to his actions.

*Slave of God* implies different Gods within its universe. When viewed from the perspective of code and the engine, Increpare himself is the God whose code chains the NPCs and even the player. If viewed from the perspective of the NPC, the player is the God. As it is the Player whose action triggers *BlueMan* into motion, the Player who provides context to *Bouncers* and the Player who breaks the monotony of *Abdullah's* dance routine.

But if seen from a thematic angle, the Player and the human, we are slaves to our whims and senses. The music drawing us into the interiors of a nightclub, the silence drawing us away from it. The dark corners pulling us down into a psychedelic pit and our blurry vision becoming a gateway to disorient ourselves, providing a brief illusion of detachment from reality itself. Perhaps, there are Gods and Slaves living within each of us, governing and restricting what we can and cannot do.

*You can play *Slave of God*, and discover Stephen Lavelle's large body of work at [increpare.com](http://increpare.com).*



# *The Castle Doctrine: Neighborhood Bondage*



Everyone knew what *The Castle Doctrine* was about before it even came out—a flaw, I suppose, due to prolonged alpha and beta release cycles. Jason Rohrer added to the hype of his violent portrayal of home invasion with several interviews where he contextualized the game design with his personal experiences.<sup>1,2</sup> Although his game is far from the only instance of problematic empowerment of white men in videogames, the criticism leveled against the game is strongly connected with the auteur interpretation that emerges from a single designer. When a white man creates a game where paternalism festers in its most reductive state it is reasonably doubtful that the experience will empower anything but the dominant oppressive discourse.

The immediate critiques of Rohrer's design such as Stephen Beirne's *Fixing The Castle Doctrine's Self-Defense Parable* give us a sense that the game's mechanics are offensively simplistic given the severity of the content. According to Beirne, *Castle Doctrine's* message of justifiable murder should not be abstracted into a game if it fails to consider complex socio-economic factors that contribute to violence in American society.<sup>3</sup> Cameron Kunzelman levels even stronger accusations that the game is "simple" and continues the "infinite apologism around the fetish of violence in games." Kunzelman writes that Rohrer's attempt to explore domestic security depends on his privilege as a white man who





Figure 1: <http://thecastledoctrine.net/alarm.jpg>

cannot understand the emotional stakes of systematic violence that daily endangers minority communities.<sup>4</sup> For these reasons, Kunzelman refuses to play a game that is blind to the real issues at hand.

After playing *Castle Doctrine* when it was first released and since then returning to it for this piece, I agree that *Castle Doctrine* fails to capture with any reality the actual mechanisms of violence that dictate neighborhood relations. Yet unlike Kunzelman, I think that playing the game is valuable, at least as a lens for understanding the white paranoia that compelled Rohrer to create it in the first place. Its servers demand a mental state that believes danger is always knocking (with a crowbar). In a preview piece for Gamespot, Carolyn Petit builds on Beirne's work and argues that the game's simplistic system "cultivates a belief that the world is more violent and

dangerous that it actually is."<sup>5</sup> As I make a comparative reading of the game's ideals of masculinity I show that fear for one's property resonates as far back as the 1700s. Instead of interpreting *The Castle Doctrine* as "a statement game,"<sup>6</sup> I am much more interested in first examining this historical context and then considering the emergent effects of power and domination conveyed by its mechanisms. After persistent exploration I have learned that even the most monolithic structure of masculinity will buckle onto itself. This game is kind of queer.

As implied in the title, the game's premise is the axiom that man's home is his castle and he has the right to defend that space. Visitors to [thecastledoctrine.net](http://thecastledoctrine.net) will see a yellow pages banner advertising an Alarm Security System picturing a cartoon nuclear family (Fig. 1). Below the family portrait

are some stark words: “Some things can’t be replaced”, which warns fathers perusing the phonebook that they must not hesitate when it comes to security. Rohrer himself hopes that the paratextual image will outline the fictional suburbia his game inhabits:

*“This game is a 1991 period piece about the social construction of manhood in that era. This is how I remember my security-obsessed father, and other fathers that I’ve met from that time share many of his traits”*<sup>7</sup>

In the nearly twenty year gap between the 1991 advertisement and the game’s 2014 release, a generation of young millennial men have started families and questioned whether their liberal ideology may need to regress to more traditional machismo in order to defend their household. In contrast to Rohrer’s self-doubt about his own role as a father, the man in the advertisement displays no hesitance in asserting his masculinity. He may smile with his family but behind the facade is a man willing to murder any trespasser who threatens the sanctity of his home.

The domestic setting of *The Castle Doctrine* bears connection to the literary tradition of “Shelter Writing”, a phrase coined by Susan Fraiman as “a text in which domestic shelter is lost, longed for, and finally recreated by a narrator”.<sup>8</sup> Fraiman initially

constructs her term to explore transgender narratives but the definition balloons into a greater discourse that describes any protagonists’ relation to the home. Although much of her work considers the domestic space inhabited by women and trans people, Fraiman claims that “the Ur-shelter text is Robinson Crusoe, in which Crusoe structures time as well as space... by methodically devising a domesticity of his own”.<sup>9</sup> Author Daniel Defoe creates a castaway cut-off from the imperial motherland who must assert his identity as a British citizen by carefully reconstructing his material culture. Building furniture and performing domestic acts such as cheese making, pottery, and pet owning allow Crusoe to maintain psychological connection with his faraway European culture.

Curiously, throughout the text, Crusoe harbors an incessant urge to improve his shelter through the infinite act of home-making.<sup>10</sup> Already, the theme of the domestic man parallels Castle Doctrine’s white suburban avatars. The reader of the home security advertisement is supposed to feel a similar urge to upgrade and improve their house, purchase a guard animal, and prepare for the worst. The security industry behind the advertisement depends on perpetuating nostalgia for safer times and an eternal longing for sanctuary. However, unlike other domestic characters that Fraimann explores, the men of Castle Doctrine never need to equate the safety of

shelter with bodily safety. Fraimann shows us that marginalized groups find refuge in spaces free from the oppressive dangers of society whereas *the Castle Doctrine* players are always guaranteed to be out of harm's way when a burglar enters. As Kunzelman argues, the game mischaracterizes violence to make the player fear for their sanctity of property and never personal safety.

It is important that the advertisement never portray the worry as irrational, or it risks undermining the same masculinity it advocate in its clientele. As narrator of *The Castle Doctrine*'s official trailer reports, "nothing is random" and "Every outcome in this world is the result of choices made by its players".<sup>11</sup> The security advertisement needs to convince the father that danger is guaranteed and home defense investment is not a constructed fear but simply the next logical step to take during perilous times. To combat fear we need technology to grant us power, which brings us back to Crusoe's embodiment of the rational man.

In a study of masculinity throughout Defoe's texts, Stephen Gregg considers how the Enlightenment aims to give men the tools to establish dominance of nature and other men.<sup>12</sup> The shift in power from nature to man is where the romance collapses into violence. Until now, my exploration of Crusoe's home-making shares more in common with a humble game of Minecraft than *Castle Doctrine*, but everything changes when Crusoe discovers a footprint

on his supposedly deserted island. In a moment of pure terror he flees to the safety of his home:

*"When I came to my castle (for so I think I called it ever after this), I fled into it like one pursued... for never frightened hare fled to cover, or fox to earth, with more terror of mind than I to this retreat"*<sup>13</sup>

The transformation from the language of home to castle begins the moment Crusoe fears the Other.<sup>14</sup> Immediately his agrarian habits must be reforged into those of a hardened tactician. Fortifications must be made, armaments mounted, escape plans crafted.

Akin to the trap-builders who make up the *Castle Doctrine* neighborhoods, Crusoe builds his defenses:

*"In the inside of this I thickened my wall to about ten feet thick with continually bringing earth out of my cave, and laying it at the foot of the wall, and walking upon it; and through the seven holes I contrived to plant the muskets, of which I took notice that I had got seven on shore out of the ship; these I planted like my cannon, and fitted them into frames, that held them like a carriage, so that I could fire all the seven guns in two minutes' time; this wall I was many a weary month in finishing, and yet*

*never thought myself safe till it was done*<sup>15</sup>

In many ways, the discovery of the footprint could not have occurred at a more perfect time. Crusoe became complacent with his homespun existence while he reigned uncontested over the island's natural resources. The paranoia of danger propels him to further embrace Enlightenment-era ingenuity and craft a quick fire mechanism for his guns. To borrow the vocabulary of a real-time strategy game: Crusoe spent the early game building his economy and now he can devote his efforts to defenses that will allow him to extend his dominance over dangerous intruders.

*The Castle Doctrine* begins at this moment when language shifts from house to castle, from economic productivity to defense. At the crux, the father realizes he must defend the fruits of his heterosexual labor (a wife and kids) and economic labor (money in the vault) from anonymous, ever-present danger. Although the four gray walls were sufficient to expel the elements of nature, they need to be bolstered by traps to deter human invaders.

I draw particular attention to the idea of investment in the last lines of the passage above: "this wall I was many a weary month in finishing, and yet never thought myself safe till it was done". The fear of loss, that ubiquitous emotion of the perma-death mechanic, demands precaution. Diverting

resources into these precautions are secondary investments that further bind the defender to the domestic space in a dangerous cycle. The more energy Crusoe pours into his castle, the more valuable it becomes, and the more he needs to improve its defenses.

Similarly, the first traps one builds in *Castle Doctrine* can only be purchased from the \$2,000 starting fund, but each passing hour of play commits more time and thought to the family's defenses. Early on, if you successfully bait a wealthy player to their death, you can rapidly improve the defenses of your home. Better traps means your citadel will last longer against the robbers, but it also means you are a greater target. The compulsion to repeatedly log back into the game to check whether any robberies have occurred is succinctly captured by Crusoe: "we find the burden of anxiety greater, by much, than the evil which we are anxious about".<sup>16</sup> The medium of a game permits the careful construction of anxiety to finally collapse into tragic endings when you return to desecration: a wooden wall axed—\$2—an electric floor grate short-circuited—\$20—a dog body with squares of blood staining its pixelated head—\$320—wasted. The larger the labyrinth, the more stuff you are responsible for maintaining. Once everything is lost and your house is in ruins, all that is left is to try again; to seek, as the Fraiman says, the shelter that has been lost.



This comparative reading of Robinson Crusoe and *The Castle Doctrine* has been fruitful to understanding the compulsive creativity entrenched in masculine homemaking, but I must draw attention to the key difference in “the enemy”. Crusoe fears cannibals. The footprint is not just evidence of human presence but also the shoeless savage, thereby throwing Crusoe back into the imperial struggle between Europe and the New World. Defoe gives us a model to understand the domestic man and Crusoe’s moment of conflict is racially motivated in a way that *The Castle Doctrine* omits. Rohrer’s game takes place in an entirely white world, presumably a suburbia priced out of racial and ethnic diversity, and thus Robinson Crusoe alone is an insufficient lens to view Rohrer’s exploration of masculinity.

In order to delve further into domestic masculinity and justify my initial claim for a queer reading of *The Castle Doctrine*, I make a leap to a more modern lens: the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe. I must note that Mapplethorpe is an incredibly complex artist whose work includes many black models, but for the sake of finding a language to describe *Castle Doctrine* I will limit my reading to one particular image titled Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter. It is a black and white dual portrait where the spheres of domesticity, masculinity, and sadomasochism converge around two white men positioned next to

a rather campy antler end table. Dressed in leather, the men—one, clean shaven, sitting in a leather wingback chair; the other, bearded, wearing a policeman’s hat, and leaning against the chair—have the audacity to stare back defiantly at the camera. As noted by Mapplethorpe scholar Richard Meyer, the men radiate confidence in their roles<sup>17</sup> despite the flagrant perversion of heterosexual appearance.

Immediately, a question of ambiguity emerges; which one is Brian Ridley? Do we read the photo left to right and affix the name Brian to the younger man sitting in the chair, limbs chained together and leashed to Lyle’s nonchalant pose? Or does the first name Brian belong to the man in power and control, the leather daddy, standing with a whip in hand and a stern gaze? Despite these signifiers, the power resists placement. The sitting man is like a king on a throne and seems completely comfortable with the appearance of submission suggested by the chains.<sup>18</sup> Meyer argues that “each man appears equally dominant, even defiant, in the face of the camera”.<sup>19</sup> The answer is eternally nebulous and incredibly striking against a “fabulously normative interior”<sup>20</sup> where one might expect the nuclear family to pose for a Christmas card. Instead the space has been appropriated for male-on-male consensual sexual violence.

Richard Meyer’s scholarship uses Pat Califa’s definition of sadomasochism which I find to be a valid tool for the remainder

of my analysis:

*“Sex which involves adopting fantasy roles, using implements to produce stress or erotic pain, and applying various techniques, such as physical restraint, to create a consensual exchange of power between the participants”<sup>21</sup>*

These implements, techniques, and restraints often carry an aura of sexual deviancy far from the standard portrayals of suburban sexuality. The reductive popular mythology around sadomasochism or s/m condemns the deeds to underground dungeons that can be hidden from the public, but Lyle and Brian prefer to flaunt their costumes in the heteronormative living room. The blinds are open, they are not hiding from the neighbors, and they welcome voyeurs in addition to the camera’s gaze. The photograph’s depiction of possible spectatorship along with Califa’s particular articulation of “roleplaying” and consensual agreements between participants invokes a system of feedback pleasure analogous to games. The men enjoy their fantasies: they purchase violent s/m equipment, they agree to predetermined rules, then let their kink emerge within the rules of the game space. They are suburban sadomasochists, and I posit they are the white men of Castle Doctrine.

As I reread Castle Doctrine reviews, the s/m undertones became clear. In his

review for Polygon, Russ Pitts describes his experience with successful traps: “Watching as criminal after criminal broke themselves against my defenses, I felt something like a thrill awake inside of me”. To preserve the context of his quote, I add that he links the elation of discovering a new corpse with the economic rewards that grow in his vault. With each death his house attracts more and more greedy thieves hoping to steal from his growing nest egg. The remainder of my essay is a critical exploration of this emotional arc from death to dollars in order to tease apart moments of pleasure (and pain) found within the act of home invasion.

Castle Doctrine is not the only game to give positive feedback rewards, but here the source of the reward is entwined in another human’s error. One knows that the corpses piling up on your home video security were all controlled by other players on the server. Within the zero-sum structure of hubris and defeat the game becomes an exploration in power dynamics. Unlike chess or other symmetric strategy games, these power dynamics are inherently unfair and oppressive as each side attempts to dominate the other during an attempted penetration into the house. The homeowners hope that meticulous preparation and tactical design will overwhelm the burglars’ improvisational assault, and yet as defenders they are distinctly passive by virtue of being absent during the break-in and must rely on the

automata they construct. In contrast, the robbers lack specific, local knowledge but trust general trap design algorithms will lead them to discover a vulnerability in the house's killing engine. Such aggressive, traumatizing directional heuristics<sup>22</sup> lead me to argue that elements of sadomasochism are inherent to the emergent gameplay.

Unlike grinding for gold on NPCs, *Castle Doctrine* demands player on player domination for your reward, and it contains a recording system which emphasizes the pleasure of defending vulnerable interior spaces. When someone dies in your trap the game gives you a snuff film that can be played and replayed at your leisure to enjoy a robber's last few moments of panic before his demise. These are immensely intimate, nearly-pornographic pleasures that hinge around the climax of death or success. While watching an attempted robbery, the builder knows the proper path the burglar should take and notices the incorrect deviations that slowly compound until the fatal end result. Even more tantalizing are near misses when an invader almost solves the puzzle only to fail inches from the vault. These videos are essential to the game's psychological experience because they mediate the site of loss and success that the homeowner would otherwise not be able to witness while they are away from their house.

Now the time investment required by castle upkeep that I discussed in the

context of *Crusoe* gains an emotional component. The larger and more complex your domestic space, the greater intimacy you can experience with would-be thieves before the jaws snap shut. The sexual frustration in the neighborhood grows as multiple neighbors attempt to rob you and fall victim to your intricate designs. The houses with the most funds creep up to the top of the server list and become a rather grotesque high score chart. Beside each name, the tables list the amount of cash in the vault as well as the number of attempted robberies and the number of deaths among those who tried. These numbers correlate wealth to voyeuristic pleasure—the richest players have invested the most time learning the game and therefore have the most videos of pain and death.

Never forget that s/m carries a theme of theatricality, and the power roles can be easily reversed depending on the props and tools at each man's disposal.<sup>23</sup> The interchangeable robber sprite warns us about the potential role reversal of the home invasion narrative because a player must test their own traps under the identical graphical guise before other robbers can make an attempt. The robber sprite simultaneously embodies both the player protagonist ensuring their home is safe and other player antagonists who wish to inflict harm. In place of *Crusoe's* savage Other, *Castle Doctrine* tells us to build castles against ourselves.

The game also permits the robbers to carry in an array of tools that can undermine the house contraptions and seem analogous to the pain-inducing paraphernalia of s/m. To refer back to Brian Ridley, the whip changes hands and the homeowner must now submit to the violent destruction carried out by the intruder. Weapons like the club and revolver provide the much abhorred option to slay animals and family members, but I am far more interested in the subversive ludic suffering produced during the struggle between players for control of the domestic space. Tools such as the saw and crowbar are even more sadistic because they permit violent deconstruction of the labyrinth space itself and give the robber access to previously restricted areas of the house. With tools the robber can violently rewrite the rules of consent laid out by the homeowner and convert the transgression into economic trauma as expensive sections of the house must be replaced. A particularly unique case is the drugged meat which can put a pit bull to sleep until a player walks over its tile. Not only does the robber subdue an active component of the house, but if they kill a family member or access the vault, then that dog's new location is permanently saved. It is quite possible that the dog blocks a necessary pathway and the house becomes impossible to safely navigate without more tools. Until the homeowner rebuilds the traps, they must cede access to the invader's manipulations.

Yet the obscenity of the tools are a necessary form of equilibrium in a neighborhood where male-on-male s/m is the only neighborly interaction. As I conclude my reading of *Castle Doctrine*, I wish to draw attention to the shadow behind the two men in Mapplethorpe's photograph. Feminist scholar Peggy Phelan reads the shade as a policeman's shadow which invokes the iconography of the police state.<sup>24</sup> These men are literally chained to each other and remind us that the economy of *Castle Doctrine* is entangled in suffering, violence, and voyeurism. Everyone watches everybody else's house. Many video recordings consist of a curious resident popping in, looking for the first sign of danger, then scooting back out the door. If there is a sign of weakness or vulnerability, these opportunists return with tools and punish the patriarch's blatant mistakes. Newcomers to the game suffer a steep learning curve until they invest enough time and failure into understanding the basics of trap design and defense. The metagame dictated by the s/m mechanics I have analyzed convert the server into a gauntlet for conformity. Although I do not have the room to explore the means of suburban hegemony, I must say Rohrer succeeds in generating an emergent representation of "keeping up with the Joneses."

At this point, my exploration of masculinity in *Castle Doctrine* has moved far beyond a nebulous fear of the suburban Other suggested by the home security advertisement.



Instead we have a model of self-enforced, self-policed patriarchy where fathers compel one another to defend their castle or suffer the consequences. I conclude with perverse irony that Rohrer's system emergently asserts that the heterosexual nuclear family can only achieve stability through transgressive male-on-male sadomasochism. Auteur theory seems inadequate to explain why these dads spend more time constructing and performing sadomasochistic torture on one another than spending time with their families. Rohrer's game destabilizes American domestic space into a perverse intersection of masculinity, utilitarianism, and queerness. It is my intention that this essay adds to the body of queer deconstructive work in video games. I motion to Gerald Voorhees' claim that: "a great deal of digital gameplay is motivated by queer desire"<sup>25</sup> and that there are fundamental queer structures repressed by heteronormative narratives. In a games marketplace dominated by serial sports simulations and military shooters, queer readings of these predominately masculine systems are essential to understanding millennial constructions of manhood.

*"Joey DiZoglio slowly migrates through Providence studying H.P. Lovecraft, videogames and medicine along the way."*



A CON-

VERSATION

WITH JAKE

CLOVER

*An Interview from The Arcade Review*





**Zolani Stewart:** I've been playing your games for a while now, Jake, and they never came off to me as reflective of any 'professional' experience, or any hard technical knowledge. They're often very messy and jagged, and yet what I appreciate is how you're able to still create a really powerful mood and tone, a vivid world and aesthetic, and a story in that world with the uncommon tools you have. So I'm interested in knowing how exactly you got into making games, how this became a pattern for you.

**Jake Clover:** I think something that got me interested to start making games was *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. I found it very immersive with all the weather systems and lively cities, in both sound and visuals. I began drawing maps inspired by the GTA city maps, then I made a game, basically a city map with a person walking around on it using Game Maker. Once I found out about Jonatan Söderström's short free games a few years ago, they really got my attention and turned me into a different direction I guess, and I began doing very similar work to his. Realising that games could be done quickly and be left rough/raw made me continue going down that path as it is great if you aren't so interested in programming or making the technical side of games, and you could focus mainly on the creative side. Other developers like The Catamites and Jack King-Spooner have further influenced me on that path.

**Zolani:** Do you think that you also focus mainly on sound and visuals?

**Jake:** Yeah, I am really interested in creating worlds at the moment through sound and visuals. I think sound is really important and it can be used to fill in missing/limited visual information, like in *Nuign Specter*, the shotgun feels powerful because of the loud free shotgun sound effect and quick flash against the rest of the very slow and quiet game. In my game

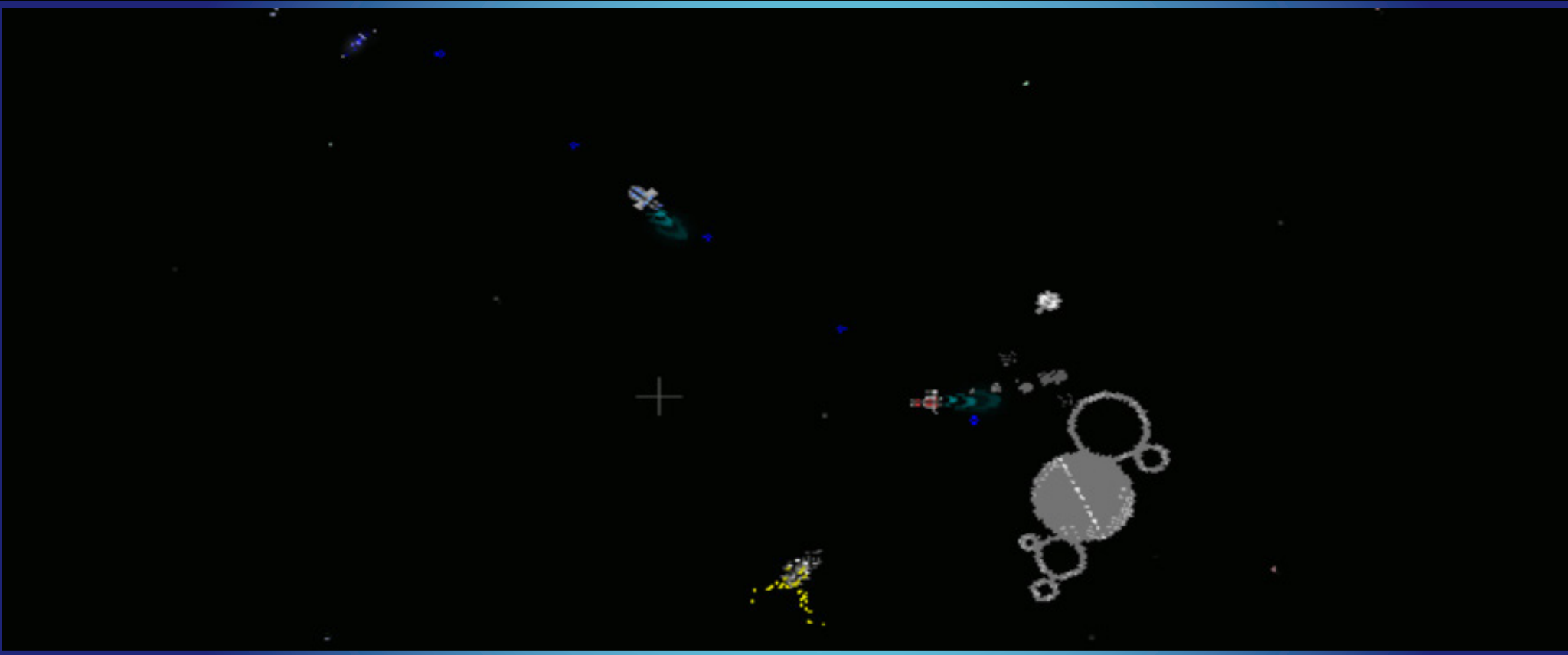
*Hernhand* I was interested in trying to make the world have lots of sounds that would, hmm, like fill in for the scrappy MS paint visuals and substantialize the world. A low hum coming from behind a wall, there must be something working behind the wall. I also like the idea of making it obvious the world is constructed, like the characters look like card-board with a picture on it, so yeah I'm interested in the sound playing a bigger part.

**Zolani:** Some of your early games are more like typical arcade games, the road racer stuff, but it really bends in that direction later on, you seem to put a lot of energy into the sound and visual work, so much that your games are often short and really easy to get through. It was kind of a surprise playing *Space Pirate Dernshous*, it seemed to be one of the most explicitly technical things you've made! Full of metrics and item stats and everything.

**Jake:** Yes my *Space Pirate* game is a bit more technically like *Escape Velocity* with numbers and things, I think I got carried away trying to make space ships fly around and do small decisions. But I find it difficult to make games that play like games, I don't think I'm good at making strategies for a game and have it still be fun, or I'm not interested enough to go all the way for it to work well. So I think I would have preferred *Dernshous* a bit less gameplay like, and maybe if I put more effort into narratives on-board ships you raid and have the game less fast and exciting.

**Zolani:** But at the same time, there's technicality to sound and visual work. It isn't programming, but its a craft, something you can improve on, and get complicated with. Your work with that can be so elaborate, you've crafted some amazing worlds and concepts just off clever visual crafting and good sound, some of which is hard to tell how you actually did it.

# SPACE TO DOCK



## SPACE TO DOCK

*Jake:* I guess it is technical to do the sound and visual work but I don't really notice it because it's easy to be satisfied with easy tools like Unity or Game Maker, where you can basically put your sound in and you can hear it just like that. I've been using mostly free sounds from internet, and then editing them in Audacity, usually just slowing them down and making them very loud to distort them. I'm interested in recording my own sounds and using them, I've taken my first step with my laptop microphone where I mumble into it and hit something like a kettle and then edit the sound. I find it amazing to then be able to put a really bad sound into a Unity game and be able to just have doppler effect on it and change max distance and everything feels like you're really there in the game.

*Zolani:* I always have enjoyed how loud and visceral you make your sounds. I once tweeted about how they "rip apart" the landscape. I think one of my favourite sounds from you is that ripping saw you hear with your death animation in GROUND STOOGIE, I don't think many people have played that one. But the whole game has this amazing landscape of sounds that are so harsh and chaotic, it gives an overwhelming apocalyptic subtext that makes it so chilling. You've always came off as one of the few game makers who can really appreciate a good gunshot sound.

*Jake:* You're very kind! Ground Stooage was mainly inspired by the post apocalyptic atmosphere in *Half Life 2*. the Half life games do a very good job with sound, it's been really influential. I really like the 'overwatch' voice in Half-Life 2 and all the various button beep sounds.

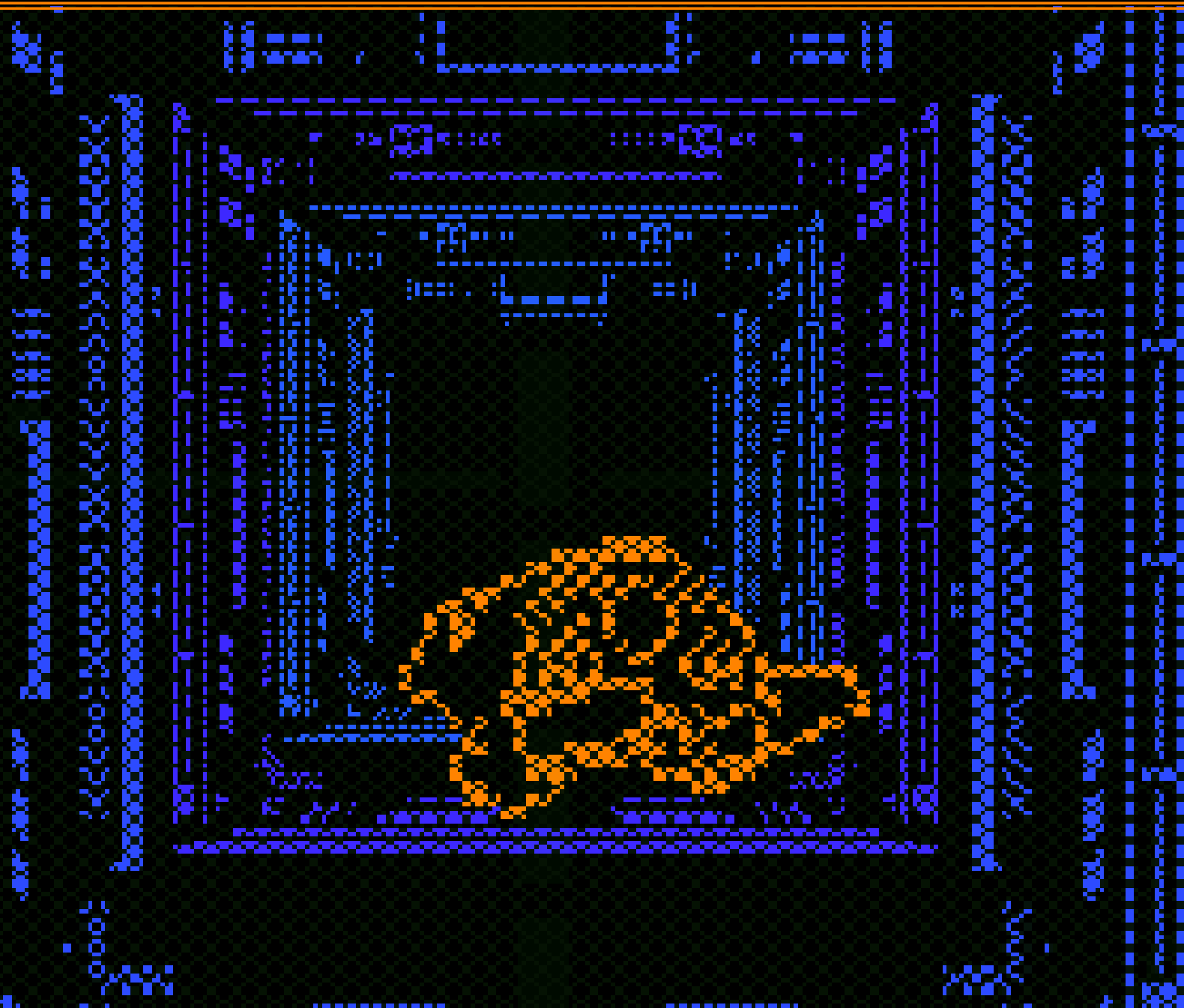
*Zolani:* There are definitely noises in Ground Stooage that sound like those old Valve UI sounds. And with *Nuign Specter*, the shotgun is this sort of thing punctuates the story. It's what moves everything forward. But there are other sounds; the flickering of the shop lights against the silence, especially after you shoot the shopkeeper, is so crushing, it really pushes the weight of what you just did, that you killed another "man" in cold blood. I remember being so shocked in that scene. *Nuign Specter* becomes so demonic and sinister because of that.

*Jake:* I feel like *Nuign Specter* is one of the best games I've made. People seem to like it a lot, and whenever I look back at the game it's always somehow better than I remembered it to be. I think it works because it's very simple yet effective, it's slow but not boring (which I'm really interested in trying to capture in my games), it's not too obscure or experimental, and I didn't overthink anything in the game really which I usually do with other games. And yeah I wanted to pay attention to having a lot of quiet sounds that you might not hear, to add depth to the simple images on the screen.



Zolani: I'd say what makes *Nuign Specter* good is that it clearly outlines these very powerful and consequential relationships that we can't fully understand. I think it's clear early on that the wolf is doing something very wrong, or that something is wrong *with* him, that his relationship with the Spectre is much more insidious than we'd assume, but there's nothing we can do about it. There's a clear question of control, and the wolf's agency, whether he intently gains from his actions or if he's being coerced/intimidated/possessed. And there are these demonic, mystical implications looming under that.

And that quietness you talk about also comes off a lot in *Less Raum*, right? I think that was one of the more difficult games you've made. It's very hard to tell what you're supposed to do, and the alien language made parsing the context a very peculiar challenge. It's really visually obscure, using mostly on glowing outlines of objects if I remember correctly, and it becomes hard to tell what the shapes are. It's not the most well known of your games, but I like it if anything because it's very different from a lot of the other things you've made.



Jake: *Less Raum* reminds me of 'This is Infinity' by Jonatan Söderström, and I think I wanted to do something similar and make a very alien-feeling game. I didn't have a goal in mind other than to make it feel alien, be trippy and not understandable. There was no plan, it was improvised (like most of my games) and I had seen some quote of someone who made what felt like a 'lost gameboy game' in an interview or something and wanted to include that idea. The alien text doesn't mean anything itself, but I wanted it to look like something was going on, there is some kind of exchange going on, as if the game is trying to convey instructions and other information. So the text is just a visual thing, you always look for meaning in writing, like it must be trying to say something, but here it is only something to look at and not understand. There was a game by Messhof that had it's own language, that was an influence too.



**Zolani:** I want to talk about what is probably your most popular game, *Sluggish Morss*! I'm interested in knowing how you and Jack got together to make this game, how this project came together into something you were able to complete and put out.

**Jake:** I think after playing each other's games on Game Jolt, Jack and I started emailing and decided to do a collaboration. Jack first made a number of gritty electronic songs that I really liked, and I basically started making some scenes for a game which I thought worked with the music. I didn't have a clue what I was doing other than really enjoying his music and making scenes that I thought looked good with the music. Hotline Miami was an influence for my game, and it had just gotten me interested in grungy music and so Jack's music was so exciting to hear. Jack started making his own game while I was doing mine, and what he was doing motivated me to begin working differently from how I made games before. His very collagey thrown-together style was really interesting to see, and I thought it looked very good together with his music. I've always liked drawing and making things with my dad but it hasn't been until seeing a lot of Jack's work that I've thought about bringing those kinds of things into games to use as characters and backgrounds.

**Zolani:** This may sound like a weird question to ask but, I want to know what you think *Sluggish Morss* is about. Because I can sit here all day and throw around interpretations, (in fact I've done so in writing), but I want to ask you how you feel about the ideas the game presents, because *Sluggish Morss* feels like one of the

most personal things you've made. More than your other games, it always came off to me as a game reflective of more explicit personal and emotional experiences.

**Jake:** I interpret my *Sluggish Morss* game as being about the second or so before the character you play as dies. And there's these spirits that have to show him the way to go. Well that was the general idea I had in mind to try and somehow focus what I was doing. I think I got too carried away adding too much to my game, Jack's music is always overlayed by this annoying computer voice and the whole thing feels up itself and is like a trailer or something. So my *Sluggish Morss* game doesn't mean much to me, I don't really think about it. But it was great to be sharing ideas and imagery, and getting to listen to heaps of Jack's music that he made while we worked on our games.

**Zolani:** The thing with *Sluggish Morss* is that it has all this energy but it's filled with all these obscure visual symbols and allusions, and this really coded and difficult dialogue and language with its "characters" and its story. I guess as a stuffy art critic type that kind of thing gets me really interested and excited, but tbh most writing on the game just passes it off as a freaky psychedelic trip.

**Jake:** I guess I'm glad other people seem to like it, but I much prefer Jack's game, honestly, I really enjoy his *Sluggish Morss* game. His game feels vast, yet it's quite small, it feels like a journey and like things are about to turn around and change.





**Zolani:** I was going to ask you what you thought about Jack's sequels! I always had trouble with *A Delicate Time in History* and *Ad: Infinitum*. They were always very alienating for me, eccentric but cold and kind of lifeless. The vibrant energy and succinctness of the first one felt swapped out for something much more cynical, and long-winded. But I always liked that series because of how harsh of a turn it was willing to take. I think it was apparent that Jack wanted to flesh out something that was more expansive, a universe that reflected history and detail, which is why it always felt like you were part of this big world, but the way Jack situates his worlds always pulls in the opposite direction, towards spaces that feel isolated, and closed in. I guess that conflict between Jack's vision for the series and his artistic tendencies is what makes *Delicate Time in Space* special for me.

**Jake:** Yeah I think *A Delicate Time in History* is my favourite one of his. It has a kind of warm feeling and a certain charm that *Ad: Infinitum* didn't seem to have, which isn't a bad thing. It was different because of the appearance. I think he used a different program to make the game, like the effects over the images, it felt a bit swamped in goo or something, more slimey. It definitely feels darker and weirder.

I feel like my sluggish morss game is too full of stuff overlapping, maybe separating parts of it could have improved it. I like the made up text which comes up as subtitles, like in some of my other games too, I think that's an interesting part of the game.

**Zolani:** It's also worth noting "not august" here too, right? Which was cool because the music was a lot more rock and metal oriented, than the typical electronic,

space-opera stuff he makes.

**Jake:** With not august I liked the idea of the blocky pixel style contrasting with Jack's music. I remember in one of Cactus's videos 'Air Pirates', the visual style was very bare and blocky, simplistic, but the loud grinding music seemed to fill in for the limited graphics and played as the dirt and stuff you don't see in the graphics. I basically wanted to do the same thing. I like the atmosphere of Jack's grungy music, I used the songs from his Mitt Romney game, they're good as. I thought it could be cool to make a plane shooter, the music as the growl of the engines and grit of the destruction. But I still think the music works better with Jack's scrappy hand-drawn game. It was similar with *Space Pirate Dernshous*, I wanted the sounds and music to play a part in making the world feel more dirty.

**Zolani:** Some of your more recent games, like *Space Pirate Dernshous*, and *Tandoor*, and *Death of the Augnob* have been way more expansive and open ended, less linear. Why is that?

**Jake:** I've always been interested in making open ended games but usually find them hard to finish, unless they are very bare like *Tandoor* with not much content at all, repetitive and endless. *Dernshous* to me feels like half of a normal free-roam space game. I often don't know how to continue working on these games because there's so much to make, but there was something I liked about the emptiness of *Tandoor*, the desert setting appeals to me a lot, I decided to leave it the way it was. My room-to-room games pop up online more because they are easier to finish and be able to call 'games'. I've also become interested in how strong an atmosphere





can be created with little amount of mechanics or level, and mostly only images and sounds. I really like Bulfu's game 'cave' ([link](#)) which is a good example of why I like the room-to-room style. I'm becoming more confident in not worrying about whether my game is or isn't a game, so I guess that is why I am uploading more open ended wanderers.

*Zolani:* Isn't bulfu's stuff great? Especially *cave*. It's such a mesmerizing experience. He's definitely taking a style up from your earlier games, his influences are clear but he's making these things that are much darker, literally darker! and heavy with this really ethereal and textured use of photo and paper, and what seems to be black crayon. And cave is a game that captures that slowness you talk about, so so well. It's walk speed is just a magnitude slower than what you would be comfortable with, and that's actually how I'd describe some of your room-to-room games as well. I think he only started making games last year but I'm really looking forward to whatever he comes up with.

So I want to talk about this venture into 3D you've made. I'm interested in knowing how you got to working with Tom on *Bernband/Hernhand*, because *Bernband* is probably the best thing Tom has ever put out, in my opinion. He does something really special with that space.

*Jake:* I really like *Bernband*, I agree that it's Tom's best so far and does great work with sound and space. I wanted to make a 3D game after I saw some early footage of *Bernband* that Tom put on youtube, it was really amazing to see, it was just like his other work except gone 3D all of a sudden. I had been wanting to do 3D for a while but I always assumed it'd be really difficult to learn and work with. So I tried out Unity and found out you can do basic stuff very easily, it has a set of default 3D objects like cubes and cylinders which you can scale up and move around to create simple levels. Tom and I decided to do a collaboration, and we decided to make our

first 3D games while sharing our work and progress.

*Zolani:* I found *Bernband* to be the sort of.. Angel game to *Hernhand*'s devilness, if that doesn't sound corny. *Bernband* is a really pleasant and smooth experience, and it looks great too. But playing *Hernhand* was \*stressful\*, it was confusing, and your approach to textures and model-sprites was jarring, if also compelling in the weird way you textured and lighted that space. I explored *Bernband* all over but I could barely navigate *Hernhand*, I'm sure I didn't explore nearly as much.

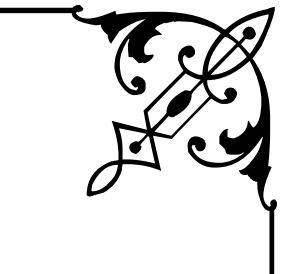
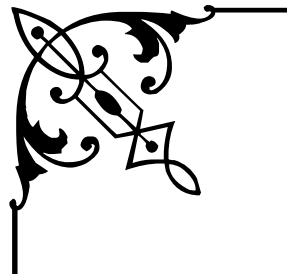
*Jake:* Yes I'm sure *Hernhand* is probably a horrible experience in comparison, especially to people familiar with games and pixel work. I wanted my game to be gritty and I guess unattractive, I like the idea of it being its own way and not worrying about how it looks to someone else. I also found the 3D very exciting, so I didn't mind/kind of enjoyed having bad MS Paint textures. I also liked how saving .jpeg files adds a little roughness to the surface of the image. That made the textures have a bit of a bumpy surface look, like concrete or something. I guess I wanted *Hernhand* to be a dirty and a noisy place, I wanted it to be like the grubby corner under a bridge where you don't really go for picnics. I also enjoy how most of the game is hidden unless you spend a bit of time wandering around, which most people haven't I'm sure.

So I was interested in doing what *Bernband* was doing, focusing on the areas you're in and exploration rather than a gameplay objective. In my opinion I don't think adding an interactive mechanic would make the game better, or would add anything, as I am mostly interested in the game working its own way and the player being a small part of things, an observer.

*Zolani:* Was it hard making *Hernhand*? Did you have trouble working out what you wanted?

*Jake:* It wasn't difficult making *Hernhand*, I only used the default cubes and shapes to do all the levels. It was so much fun!





*Zolani:* What is it that you'd like to do with yourself, Jake, after all this? Because you have huge repitire now. You've made a lot of things. And if I remember correctly from your old blog, you should be 20 years old, which is basically the same age as I am. So what's going on with you now, and what are you looking to do?

*Jake:* Yes I am 20, and at the moment I want to continue exploring ideas and making what I feel like making. I am about to start university this year and I'm going to learn all about making art. I like the idea of making dioramas, sets and models to use in games, because they can also be their own separate works, and I find that appealing.

*Zolani:* That's all I wanted to go over, Jake, thanks so much for talking with me.

*Jake:* Thanks a lot for the questions and interest, and hope you have a good time at school and university!

*Jake Clover is a gamemaker and artist who hails from Melbourne, Australia, and is, arguably, one of the most influential freeware and small game makers of the last five years. His work is numerous, spanning across genres and styles. You can play all his games, including his collaborations and compilations, on his [Gamejolt Page](#). Thank you for speaking with us, Jake!*

# Index

## Sext Adventure

Of course, there are some people (many, even) who have, for any number of wholly justified reasons, been spared from the unique anxiety of always being plugged into a system. Yet I hope, regardless if you're a Better-Never or a Never-Better about all this, that this personalization of technology is evident even without having experienced it first-hand. I'm compelled, here, to bring up the matter of the widely publicized Apple Watch as a new peak in this trend; it's another device in the ever-shifting world of computing, yet is marketed (perhaps more than any other technology product) as a timeless fashion item—a highly visible (and costly) expression of personal style through consumer electronics.

2:22am

1. Reed Morano, *Cinematographer Reed Morano on the Fight Against TV's "Smooth Motion" Setting*, 2014
2. Lulu Blue, *Modesty, Decadence, and The Machine*, 2014
3. Colette Conroy, *Theatre And The Body*, 2010
4. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation In The South, 1890-1940*, 1998

## The Illogical Journey of The Zambonis

1. In 1991, *The New York Times* called Carmen Sandiego, "the red-haired grand larcenist who is to personal computer games what the Mario Brothers are to Nintendo."

2. *Broderbund Software History*, Funding Universe.

3. The term "edutainment" is dated. Now, it is rarely used unironically, and almost always as a pejorative. The word suggests sleazy commodification of knowledge, rote drilling and memorization exercises incentivized by flashy extrinsic rewards. This, however, was not always the case. From Jimmy Maher's *The Digital Antiquarian: Apple, Carmen Sandiego, and the Rise of Edutainment*:

*"For all the early rhetoric about computers and education, one could argue that the real golden age of the Apple II as an educational computer didn't begin until about 1983 or 1984. By that time a new category of educational software, partly a marketing construct but partly a genuinely new thing, was becoming more and more prominent: edutainment. Trip Hawkins, founder of*

*Electronic Arts, has often claimed to have invented the portmanteau for EA's 1984 title Seven Cities of Gold, but this is incorrect; a company called Milliken Publishing was already using the label for their programs for the Atari 8-bit line in late 1982, and it was already passing into common usage by the end of 1983. Edutainment dispensed with the old drill-and-practice model in preference to more open, playful forms of interactions that nevertheless promised, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, to teach. The skills they taught, meanwhile, were generally not the rigid, disembodied stuff of standardized tests but rather embedded organically into living virtual worlds...It's of course true that a plain old game that requires a degree of thoughtfulness and a full-on work of edutainment can be very hard to disentangle from one another. Like so much else in life, the boundaries here can be nebulous at best, and often had as much to do with marketing, with the way a title was positioned by its owner, as with any intrinsic qualities of the title itself. When we go looking for those intrinsics, we can come up with only a grab bag of qualities of which any given edutainment title was likely to share a subset: being based on real history or being a simulation of some real aspect of science or technology; being relatively nonviolent; emphasizing thinking and logical problem-solving rather than fast reflexes. Like pornography, edutainment is something that many people seemed to just know when they saw it."*

4. Megan Murray and Brian King. Review of Logical Journey of the Zoombinis. Math Equity. TERC.edu.

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9. Ibid.

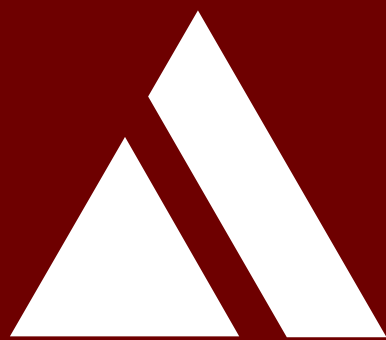
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Jordan Speer. You can view his artwork at  
[jordanspeerart.tumblr.com](http://jordanspeerart.tumblr.com). Thank You, Jordan!*





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Console 3.0.4 (default, May 14, 3013) [AMM v.3000 512 bit  
(NOV512)] on wim64  
>>> end()  
Thank You For Reading!  
>>>
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